

From the author of *Religion in  
Britain from the Megaliths to Arthur*



**ROBIN  
MELROSE**

**FAIRIES,  
GHOSTS,  
KING ARTHUR,  
AND HOUNDS  
FROM HELL**

The Pagan and Medieval Origins of British Folklore

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AND HOUNDS FROM HELL



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Of British Folklore*

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# INTRODUCTION

## WHAT IS FOLKLORE?

As Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud say in their Introduction to the *Oxford Dictionary of English Folklore*, “folklore” is notoriously difficult to define with rigour, and the term “now covers a broader field than it did when invented in 1848, linking many aspects of cultural traditions past and present. It includes whatever is voluntarily and informally communicated, created or done jointly by members of a group (of any size, age, or social and educational level); it can circulate through any media (oral, written, or visual); it generally has roots in the past, but is not necessarily very ancient; it has present relevance; it usually recurs in many places, in similar but not identical forms; it has both stable and variable features, and evolves through dynamic adaptation to new circumstances.”<sup>1</sup>

Although the term “folklore” was invented in 1848, traditional stories of fairies, ghosts, King Arthur and hounds from Hell existed long before that. Folklore has its roots in the past, and Britain has a long past. The first written texts (in Latin) date from the 6th century, but the prehistory of Britain is much older: we now know, thanks to archaeology, that Britons began settling down, growing crops and raising livestock around six thousand years ago. Of course, medieval and Early Modern Britons did not know this, but they could see the remains of Bronze Age barrows or of Iron Age hillforts and knew they were built by earlier inhabitants of Britain.

With such a long history there is naturally a wealth of folklore, so I have had to restrict what I can cover. I have tried to include only folklore collected before 1900, and much earlier if possible, in the belief that earlier folklore is closer to the “folk” and more “authentic”, since it is less influenced by later folklore. And I have restricted my survey of prehistory. Initially I was going to start with the Roman period, when the first writing

came to Britain, but I realised that this made little sense without a survey of Britain in the Iron Age. For that reason, my first chapter concerns Iron Age hillforts and the strange burial practices of some Iron Age Britons, and the Romans appear only in Chapter 2 (the people and places of Roman Britain), and Chapter 3 (burial practices, temples and curse tablets). Since fairies are associated with the Celts, Chapter 4 concerns Celtic survival after the coming of the Anglo-Saxons in the 5th and 6th centuries, while Chapter 5 looks at Celtic saints (mainly Welsh and Irish) and their strange ability to resurrect animals. These chapters are by no means exhaustive, and consider only those places that are in some way relevant to the story of fairies and other supernatural beings.

These first chapters are general, and from Chapter 6 I begin looking at folklore by region: these regions include the Celtic countries of Cornwall, Wales, and Scotland; those areas which border on the Celtic countries – Wessex (the counties of Dorset, Somerset, Wiltshire and Hampshire), and the West Midlands (Herefordshire, Shropshire and Cheshire); and what I call the Anglo-Saxon/Viking areas of England, namely East Anglia (Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire); the East Midlands (Northamptonshire and Lincolnshire); and Northern England. Before I look at the folklore, however, I review some basic history, especially in relation to the Anglo-Saxons and the later Vikings, who had a particular impact on the East Midlands, northern England and parts of Scotland; and I survey some of the better known medieval saints of the various regions, since the miracles of the saints almost certainly made people more receptive to tales of fairies and other supernatural beings.

## THE MAIN CHARACTERS OF BRITISH FOLKLORE

### *Fairies*

The most fascinating characters of British folklore are the fairies, who abound in the folklore of the Celtic regions – Cornwall, Wales and Scotland – but are also found in areas which may have been Celtic in prehistoric

times but are now better known for their Anglo-Saxon and Viking heritage. As the folklorists Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud say, fairies in Britain are above all a Celtic phenomenon<sup>2</sup>: “The basic European repertoire of beliefs and tales about fairies is less fully preserved in England than in the Celtic areas of Wales, Ireland and Highland Scotland, though much of it was well known here in the 17th century, and later.”

There were also fairies in Cornwall, and in areas bordering Cornwall like Devon and Somerset, though they were better known in that part of England as pixies or piskies. Tales of fairies are also found in counties of England that border on Wales – indeed, one of the earliest tales, written in the 12th century, comes from the Herefordshire/Shropshire area. Fairies are also found in the north of England, but they were not as common as bogles and boggarts, which were shape-shifters and often associated with water.

The word *fairy* is derived from French and came to England with the Norman Conquest in 1066. Before the Norman conquest, the word used to describe what later became fairies was elves. Elves in Anglo-Saxon England were thought to cause disease and are mentioned in spells and charms.

The origin of the word *pixie* is uncertain, but it may be related to Puck, most famous as a character in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The English word *puck* is attested already in Old English as *puca* (with a diminutive form *puce*l). Similar words are attested later in Old Norse (*púki*, with related forms including Old Swedish *puke*, Icelandic *púki*, and Frisian *puk*) but also in the Celtic languages (Welsh *pwca*, Cornish *bucca* and Irish *púca*)<sup>3</sup>.

So *puck* may be of Scandinavian or Celtic origin – but tellingly, there are a number of place-names in Ireland which include the element *puca* or *puck*<sup>4</sup>:

One of the best known is Pollaphuca in Wicklow, a wild chasm where the Liffey falls over a ledge of rocks into a deep pool, to which the name properly belongs, signifying the pool or hole of the Pooka. There

are three townlands in Clare, and several other places in different parts of the country, with the same name; they are generally wild lonely dells, caves, chasms in rocks on the seashore, or pools in deep glens like that in Wicklow all places of a lonely character, suitable haunts for this mysterious sprite. The original name of Puckstown in the parish of Mosstown in Louth, and probably of Puckstown, near Artaine in Dublin, was Pollaphuca, of which the present name is an incorrect translation. Boheraphuca (boher, a road) four miles north of Roscrea in Tipperary, must have been a dangerous place to pass at night, in days of old. Carrigaphooca (the Pooka's rock) two miles west of Macroom, where on the top of a rock overhanging the Sullane, stand the ruins of the Mac Carthy's castle, is well known as the place whence Daniel O'Rourke began his adventurous voyage to the moon on the back of an eagle ; and here for many a generation the Pooka held his " ancient solitary reign," and played pranks which the peasantry will relate with minute detail.

The origin of the words *bogle* and *boggart* is obscure, but they may be connected with English *bug*. English *bug* is in part derived from Middle English *bugge* "scarecrow, goblin", which is related to Norwegian *bugge* "big man" and dialectal Low German *Bögge* "goblin; snot."<sup>5</sup> One of the earliest uses of the word *bogle* is in the early 16th century *Eneados*, a Scots translation of Virgil's Aeneid by Gavin Douglas (a priest and poet from East Lothian), where we find: "Of Brownyis and of Bogillis full is this Buke."<sup>6</sup>

It is likely that the words *bogle* and *boggart* are related to the Cornish *piskies/pixies*. However, while pixies and piskies are probably Celtic, bogles and boggarts are arguably Germanic: they are similar to the *neck*, *nicor*, *nix*, *nixie*, *nixy*, or *nokken*, shape-shifting water spirits found especially in Scandinavia – which was the homeland of the Vikings who settled in the north of England, especially Yorkshire, in the 9th and 10th centuries.



## *Ghosts*

Belief in ghosts is widespread, and there are numerous ghost stories in the works of classical Greek and Roman writers. With the coming of Christianity to the Roman world in the 4th century AD, the concept of ghosts became linked to that of Purgatory. Until the Reformation in the 16th century England was a Catholic country and people believed not only in Heaven and Hell, but also in Purgatory, an intermediate zone where dead souls were purged of sins committed in life but not forgiven. The time spent in Purgatory was finite, so it was possible to say prayers for the dead so their time in Purgatory was shortened. The location of Purgatory was uncertain, so it is not surprising that souls suffering in Purgatory should become confused with ghosts.

This is underlined by a late 6th century tale from Pope Gregory the Great, where the soul of a man is forced to remain on earth because of his sins and can only be released by the prayers of Bishop Felix. Gregory the Great was Pope from 590 to 604, and in 593 he wrote the four books of the Dialogues, “concerning the life and miracles of the Italian Fathers and the eternity of souls.” In Book 4, Chapter 55, Gregory tells a sort of ghost story<sup>7</sup>:

Bishop Felix, whom we spake of before, saith that a virtuous Priest, who died some two years since, and dwelt in the diocese of the city of Centumcellis, and was pastor of the church of St. John in the place called Tauriana, told him that himself did use (when he had need) to wash his body in a certain place, in which there were passing hot waters: and that going thither upon a time, he found a certain man whom he knew not, ready to do him service, as to pull off his shoes, take his clothes, and to attend upon him in all dutiful manner. And when he had divers times done thus, the Priest, minding upon a day to go to the baths, began to think with himself that he would not be ungrateful to him that did him such service, but carry him somewhat for a reward, and so he took with him two singing breads: and coming thither he found the man there ready, and used his help as he was wont

to do: and when he had washed himself, put on his clothes, and was ready to depart, he offered him for an holy reward that which he had brought, desiring him to take that courteously, which for charity he did give him. Then with a sad countenance, and in sorrowful manner, he spake thus unto him: “Why do you give me these, father? This is holy bread, and I cannot eat of it, for I, whom you see here, was sometime lord of these baths, and am now after my death appointed for my sins to this place: but if you desire to pleasure me, offer this bread unto almighty God, and be an intercessor for my sins: and by this shall you know that your prayers be heard, if at your next coming you find me not here.” And as he was speaking these words, he vanished out of his sight: so that he, which before seemed to be a man, shewed by that manner of departure that he was a spirit. The good Priest all the week following gave himself to tears for him, and daily offered up the holy sacrifice: and afterward returning to the bath, found him not there: whereby it appeareth what great profit the souls receive by the sacrifice of the holy oblation, seeing the spirits of them that be dead desire it of the living, and give certain tokens to let us understand how that by means thereof they have received absolution.

Centumcellis is now Civitavecchia to the northwest of Rome; Tauriana is in the southern part of Calabria in present Taurianova in Reggio Calabria province, in the far south of Italy.

In this book I will not be looking at traditional “haunted house” ghost stories, but at what I call “ghosts in the landscape”, rather like Pope Gregory’s ghost at the baths in Tauriana.

### *King Arthur*

King Arthur is one of the best-known characters in British folklore, despite the fact that he probably never existed. He was first mentioned in the early 9th century in the Latin History of the Britons, attributed to the Welsh monk Nennius, where he is supposed to have fought a number of battles with the

Anglo-Saxons. He is a leading character in the 11th century Welsh tale *Culhwch and Olwen*, where he fought not against Anglo-Saxons, but against monsters, including the giant (and magical) boar Trwch Trwyth. In this tale his main court was at

Celliwig in Cornwall. In the early 12th century the Norman priest Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote a work in Latin, *History of the Kings of Britain*, in which he turned Arthur into a mighty warrior and king who drove the Anglo-Saxons out of Britain and created a great empire. For Geoffrey, Arthur's main court was Caerleon, the site of a Roman legionary fort near Newport in south Wales. Geoffrey's work was considered historical as late as the 16th century, and greatly influenced British folklore. In the late 12th century the French poet Chrétien de Troyes wrote a series of Arthurian romances in which one of King Arthur's courts was Camelot; this was identified much later with Cadbury Castle in Somerset and the River Camel in Cornwall.

### *Hounds from Hell*

According to Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud<sup>8</sup>, it is commonly believed that dogs “can sense anything uncanny, and show terror if forced to pass a haunted spot”; if they howl for no reason, especially at night, it “portends death, either in the house nearest to which they howl or to some of their kith and kindred”<sup>9</sup>, or is a general sign of evil being about. There are many supernatural dogs in English folklore, including black dogs, the dogs of the Wild Hunt, and the Devil as a dog.

# CHAPTER 1

## *Iron Age Britain: Fragmented Burials in Pits and Ditches, Humans Buried with Animals, and the Question of Reincarnation Among the Celts*

### THE MIDDENS OF WILTSHIRE AND EARLY IRON AGE BURIAL

Some of the earliest Iron Age sites in Britain are two enormous middens (the name that archaeologists give to an accumulation of domestic and animal waste) at All Cannings Cross and Potterne in Wiltshire. The first of these to be discovered was at All Cannings Cross, a farm near All Cannings to the east of Devizes. All Cannings Cross entered archaeological history when it was excavated by the pioneering archaeologist Maud Cunnington in 1911 and between 1920 and 1922. The All Cannings Cross site covers an area of about 4 hectares and “comprised a large quantity of artefactual material, including pottery, various bone tools and bronze items, animal and human remains, iron slag, crucible fragments, spindle whorls, loomweights and other items.”. It was originally regarded as a large open settlement of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date but has recently been reinterpreted as a midden<sup>1</sup>.

Among the broken pottery, animal bone, and other debris, Cunnington found more than 30 human cranial (skull) fragments, scattered and dispersed with no obvious pattern to their distribution; no other human remains were found. Some of the All Cannings Cross fragments had been deliberately modified, apparently to be “used for scraping or other purposes.” One had been worked into a small circular roundel, “almost exactly the size of a penny-piece” and had a hole bored well off-centre. Judging from the wear marks, it had apparently been carried or worn for

some time, perhaps as a charm or amulet<sup>2</sup>.

The midden at Potterne, to the southwest of Devizes, was excavated by Andrew Lawson between 1982 and 1985. The midden there occupies an elevated position overlooking the Avon Vale (the valley of the Bristol Avon), and has uninterrupted views towards the west as far as the Mendips, some 30 miles away<sup>3</sup>. It came to light in 1982 when a gold bracelet was discovered during grave digging in Blackberry Field, Potterne, the site of the civic graveyard. The subsequent excavations revealed the presence of an extensive midden deposit at least 5 hectares in extent and 1-2 metres deep. The midden “comprises pottery, animal bone, coprolites, worked bone and antler, bronze metalwork, human remains, flint, and numerous other artefact types overlying a surface containing numerous pits, post holes and other features. Almost all the artefactual material belongs to the early 1st millennium BC.” The area excavated, in total 20m by 10m, “yielded some 125,000 potsherds, plus 177 bronze artefacts including awls, tweezers and numerous sheet bronze fragments from vessels (mostly bowls). Worked bone and antler objects include pins, awls, combs, and a cheek-piece. Also present were amber and glass beads, plus fragments of shale bracelets and possibly cups. An archaeomagnetic date of 750 BC ... was obtained from material relating to the pre-midden occupation features, while the pottery assemblage probably spans the period c. 1000–700 BC.”<sup>4</sup>

As at All Cannings Cross, there is evidence that the midden was also a place of burial for the remains of a small number of people. At Potterne 134,000 animal bones were uncovered, and compared to this, “the human bone assemblage was tiny, with only 139 fragments recovered.” Unlike the material from All Cannings Cross, the human bone at Potterne was not restricted to cranial fragments, though these did make up more than half the assemblage. The absence of jawbones and cervical vertebrae “suggests that it was defleshed crania, rather than heads, that were present on the site.” Among the rest of the bones, thigh bones predominated; among the leg bones, “there was a marked preference for right over left limbs.”<sup>5</sup> The very

abraded condition of some of the bone fragments would suggest that “they might have been subject to various episodes of redeposition or disposal, probably of a not very reverential nature.”<sup>6</sup>

## IRON AGE HILLFORTS AND BURIAL PRACTICES

### *Wiltshire*

During the Iron Age, the most visible form of settlement in southern England was the hillfort, a defended settlement with one or more ramparts constructed on the top of a hill. The traditional view is that hillforts were built to defend against enemy attacks, but as Barry Cunliffe points out<sup>7</sup>, most early hillforts had two opposed entrances, which “are more appropriate to a society structuring its comings and goings and perhaps indulging in formal processions than one wishing to defend itself against aggression.” He points that Neolithic henge monuments of the 3rd millennium BC, which are usually regarded as ritual spaces, also had opposed entrances. Even when the enclosures were reconfigured in the Middle Iron Age (400 – 100 BC) to have only a single gate, “that structure was usually greatly elaborated to make the liminal space much more extensive by creating a long passage formed by hornworks and inturns.” This may have had a military function or served as a display of power, but it could just as well have had a ritual significance.

One of the earliest hillforts in Wiltshire was Lidbury Camp, on the upper reaches of the River Avon, which was excavated in 1913 by Maud Cunnington. She found Early Iron Age pottery there, and in one pit she found “the jaw bones of two dogs, and of two ponies, and the hoof of a pony”<sup>8</sup> – these were probably ritual deposits. An arm bone (humerus) was found on the occupied floor of the outer ditch east of the entrance. Three separate fragments of skulls were found in different parts of the ditch, and one fragment in Pit 7; two vertebrae came from the ditch on the eastern side of the entrenchment; but “the most curious of these human relics was that of the upper part of an ulna [elbow bone] cut and shaped into a scoop-like



implement.”<sup>9</sup>

Another important hillfort in Wiltshire is Yarnbury Castle, a multivallate hillfort of 28.5 acres at Berwick St James to the west of Amesbury, excavated in 1932 by Maud Cunnington. Numerous “detached fragments of humanity” were also found in various ditches<sup>10</sup>, including the upper half of a femur (thigh bone), the upper half of a radius (one of the bones of the forearm), a lower jaw ‘with a fine set of teeth’, the shaft of a femur (thigh bone), and the frontal bone of a skull. Cunnington notes that the “presence of burials close to the dwellings, often in pits not dug for the purpose, with evidence that the remains were deposited with little care, as in the case of Pit 2, as well as the frequent occurrence of detached and fragmentary human bones, is a persistent and interesting feature in connection with Iron Age sites.” It has been suggested that the fragments of skulls bear witness to a head-hunting cult, says Cunnington<sup>11</sup>, but this does not account for the limb bones:

a more interesting suggestion has been made, that seems worthy of consideration, connected with the religious ideas of the people. The Druids taught that after death the soul passed from one body to another [...] A logical result of this teaching would be an indifference to what becomes of the body after death, and if this were indeed the case, it might to a great extent account for the remarkable rarity of rich and ceremonial burials of this period, and for the careless methods of burial within and about the settlements.

### *Hampshire*

The most important hillfort in the region is Danebury hillfort at Nether Wallop (Hampshire), excavated by Barry Cunliffe over a period of twenty years. Cunliffe says that the settlement started life in the Late Bronze Age as a hilltop enclosure, a ritual site crowned by a circle of tall posts set in ritual pits (one with the possible sacrifice of dog). The first hillfort was built in 5th century BC, after the ritual posts had rotted and the pits silted up;

circular huts were associated with this phase<sup>12</sup>.

About 400 BC, or perhaps a little earlier, there was a major change. In the interior regular rows of rectangular house structures were established along planned streets, while an impressive entrance was built on the east side, and the defences were strengthened and remodelled. Danebury had become a major hill-town and the seat of considerable political authority. This condition continued for some 300 years with regular maintenance of the defences and rebuilding of the houses.

About 100 BC the eastern gateway “was completely rebuilt on a grand scale and with complex defensive hornworks ... Soon after, however, the gate was destroyed, and the fort abandoned.” Between 1971 and 1975 a continuous strip 30-40 metres wide extending across the centre of Danebury from one side to the other “was completely excavated revealing pits, gullies, circular stake-built houses, rectangular buildings and 2-, 4- and 6- post structures ranging in date from the 6th century BC to the ends of the second century BC. About 100 BC rectangular buildings, possibly of a religious nature, were erected. Excavations from 1976-80 located further pits, houses and buildings, as well as a main road crossing the fort from the east entrance. Three more rectangular “ritual” buildings were also found ... A hoard of twelve bronze axes and other objects of the 7th century BC was discovered within the fort in 1974 and 1977, suggesting that occupation at Danebury may have begun as early as the 7th century BC.”<sup>13</sup> During his excavation of Danebury, Cunliffe uncovered a large number of storage pits or underground silos, and notes that they are common on all settlement sites. It had earlier been thought that they were constructed to protect the grain from raids, but Cunliffe believes they had a different function. In his view, the seed was placed in storage pits after harvesting and before sowing, so it would be protected by the “chthonic deities” (gods or goddesses of the underworld). Once the seed was sown, offerings were

made to the chthonic deities in thanks for their protection of the grain<sup>14</sup>.

The nature of these offerings varied considerably. One offering at Danebury involved a dog and a horse which has been partially dismembered, its head and one foreleg being placed separately against the pit side<sup>15</sup>. In another pit were a pig and two calves<sup>16</sup>. Articulated horse legs were found six or seven times in a sample of 200 pits, indicating that this offering had some sort of religious significance.

But these offerings did not only involve animals. Some 300 depositions of human remains have been found at Danebury, including skulls. Fifteen complete or near complete skulls have been found in pits, together with about 30 skull fragments<sup>17</sup>. Two of the male skulls bear marks of sword wounds. Isolated skulls were placed in the middle or upper parts of pit fills (unlike complete bodies, which were placed towards the bottom of the pit). Humans were sometimes buried with animals. The pelvis of a young male aged between 18 and 25 was placed in the bottom, and in the centre, of an elongated pit with a pig skull and the innominate (hip) bone of a child nearby. There was evidence that the legs had been hacked off and the pelvis violently severed from the trunk. Five sets of human remains were buried in pits along with a raven, a bird associated with death in Celtic mythology: there were a skull and disarticulated human bone in one pit, a female skull fragment and a male torso in another, a crouched skeleton in two further pits, and disarticulated human bone in a final pit<sup>18</sup>.

### *Somerset*

The hillfort of Ham Hill in the parish of Stoke-sub-Hamdon (Somerset) is huge, and at 88.1 hectares (almost 218 acres), is regarded as the largest in England. Between 2011 and 2013, an area along the southwestern sector of the hillfort was excavated ahead of expansion of the Hamstone Quarry. Two inhumations were found in the course of the excavations, but the majority of human bone was found in a Late Iron Age enclosure ditch. "The disarticulated and partially articulated remains represent a minimum of six individuals ...These individuals are represented either by disarticulated

skulls or partially articulated crania and mandibles ... Of particular interest is the peri-mortem trauma observed on the back of one female cranium. The small diamond-shaped lesion penetrating the right occipital close to the lamboidal suture, along with a blunt force injury which has fractured the right parietal bone, together suggest a violent death.”<sup>19</sup>.

Disarticulated bone was also recovered from excavation of the rampart. These bones represent a minimum of two individuals, and three instances of bone modification were recorded. “The lateral end of a clavicle [collarbone] has been gnawed by an animal, possibly a dog; a 5th metatarsal [a bone in the foot] has been blackened by charring; and five shallow, parallel cut marks probably made by a sharp knife or blade were recorded on the anterior distal shaft of a humerus [the long bone in the arm]” The individuals in the rampart had been subject to excarnation and secondary burial, while those in the enclosure ditch had apparently died a violent death<sup>20</sup>.

### *Oxfordshire*

The hillfort of Wittenham Clumps in Oxfordshire was fortified in the Early Iron Age—the defences consisted of a substantial ditch with a counterscarp bank on its outside edge and a rampart on the inner<sup>21</sup>. Pit 3152 within the hillfort contained a “remarkable sequence of human burials.”<sup>22</sup>.

At the base lay an adult male crouched on his right side with his head to the south. A patch of charred material lay close to the feet, and a sheep/goat humerus and a rib lay under the left arm. He has been dated to 370–160 cal BC. The burial was covered by a deposit of silty clay containing small amounts of pottery and animal bone. This was overlain by a further deposit of silty clay containing four partially articulated sections of an adult female skeleton: the left femur and pelvis, the left tibia [shinbone], the sacrum and lower spine and a medial section of the spine and ribs. Cut marks were present at the distal end of the femur and proximal end of the tibia, probably from the

dismemberment or defleshing of the body. A cattle skull lay close to the skeleton, and a sheep/goat skull slightly higher in the backfill

### *Suffolk*

Burgh in the southeast of the county is the largest Iron Age fortification in Suffolk, still visible at ground level. The enclosure is bivallate, roughly rectangular and encloses 7 hectares. It was probably built in the 1st century BC as a minor oppidum — the regional centre and seat of a local chieftain with market, administrative and religious functions. It was destroyed about AD 15–25. An inner enclosure of 1 hectare was built in the northwest corner, probably just before the Conquest. This was occupied, either by an official or a noble until it was partly flattened about AD 60<sup>23</sup>.

The most important feature on the site was a large deep pit, 7.5m long by 6.35m wide by 3.2m deep, containing material of the 1st century AD. “The pit was cut into boulder-clay and the bottom 1.55m of the fill was composed of almost completely sterile layers of blue, orange and yellow clay, interleaved with thin layers of purple sand, the bulk of the material apparently being derived from the east side of the pit. These layers presumably represent fairly rapid deposits. In the upper clay layers were several large flints, up to 20cm across. Also, in the upper clay layers, at a depth of 1.8m, was a human skull, possibly that of a young adult male. The skull was lacking the lower jaw and was lying on its left side, with a large stone partially covering the face”<sup>24</sup>.

### *Northamptonshire*

Whittlebury is in the south of Northamptonshire, close to the border with Buckinghamshire, and here an Iron Age hillfort was discovered in 2000 in the vicinity of St. Mary’s church and churchyard, which are sited on a prominent hill crest<sup>25</sup>.

As part of a broader programme investigating the origins and development of the medieval settlement, a series of test pits was excavated across the modern village in 2001 and 2002. Test pits sunk

100m south-east of the church produced quantities of Iron Age pottery (in one instance over 50 sherds from a single 1m by 1m test pit) in association with features cut into the natural, together with evidence for a thick layer of redeposited clay interpreted as the degraded remains of a ploughed out bank.

In 2003, archaeological work was undertaken within the northern churchyard, together with the excavation of a number of further test pits.

These produced more Iron Age pottery, together with high quality late medieval wares. Over thirty individual skeletons were removed from the churchyard dating from the 11th to 14th century. Lying below these, and truncated by them, were the remains of three storage pits, containing large amounts of carbonized grain and the odd sherd of Iron Age pottery. One storage pit, however, remained largely intact, producing a classic Iron Age structured deposit. Four complete vessels had been placed on the base of the abandoned silo. These had been covered by an inert layer of soil, on top of which had been set part of a human skull, positioned perhaps to form a bowl.

Hunsbury Hill is an Iron Age hillfort to the south of Northampton occupied from the 4th century BC to the 1st century BC or AD. Excavations for ironstone at the end of the 19th century yielded great quantities of finds now in the Northampton and British Museums. Most of the interior was disturbed by this ironworking, but a small area to the southwest remains intact. In 1952 two trenches were excavated across the bank and ditch, revealing two phases of the rampart close to the eastern entrance. In 1988 the rampart was excavated in the northwest sector, and radiocarbon dates were obtained. “The interior of the fort was riddled with 300 or more pits, of varying sizes—six or seven were walled and one possibly contained a crouched skeleton accompanied by an iron chariot tyre, bridle bit and other pieces of iron. Several unattached skulls were found, one with three holes bored in it”, together with some 150 querns of the heavy bee-hive type. The



quantity of iron objects and slag suggests early ironstone working<sup>26</sup>.

### *North Yorkshire*

Boltby Scar is an Iron Age promontory fort in the southwest of the North York Moors, naturally defended on the west side by a precipitous cliff face, and on the east side by a semi-circular bank and ditch which encloses an area of 2.5 acres<sup>27</sup>. The hillfort was first investigated in 1938 and 1939 by G.F. Willmott, who examined the defences and parts of the interior of the enclosure including the two upstanding Bronze Age round barrows. Further excavations were carried out in 2009 and 2011, and two Bronze Age barrows were investigated.

It was found that Barrow 2 developed, probably over hundreds of years, starting life in the Early Bronze Age shortly after 2000 BC. “Fragments of Beaker and Food Vessel pottery incorporated in the turf/soil used to construct the mound and the backfill of one of the early robbing trenches indicate that the monument continued to be used for burial until around 1800 BC at the earliest.”<sup>28</sup>. Barrow 1 was investigated by Willmot and then effectively completely removed when the site was levelled.

The gold hair-loops described by Willmot as being underneath the rampart “are unlikely to be the result of casual loss or as he indicated deliberate placement beneath the rampart. A far more likely source for these is a burial which was not identified during excavation. They are significant because they are of a type now precisely dated following the discovery of a pair with the recently excavated ‘Amesbury Archer’ (and a second pair from another grave nearby) which have been dated to 2400-2200 BC. The dates for the two Amesbury burials are consistent with an early Beaker period date and would make them broadly contemporary with a fragment of Bell Beaker incorporated in the turf on the old ground surface underlying Barrow 2.”<sup>29</sup>

## BURIAL IN NON-HILLFORT SETTLEMENTS

## *Wiltshire*

Of course, not all Iron Age Britons lived in hillforts, and in 1998-9 an unenclosed Iron Age settlement was excavated at Battlesbury Bowl outside Battlesbury Camp hillfort near Warminster in Wiltshire. The Battlesbury Bowl settlement was founded towards the end of the Late Bronze Age in the 8th century BC and was occupied through the Early and Middle Iron Age, to the 3rd century BC<sup>30</sup>.

One of the most interesting features at Battlesbury Bowl was ditch 4043, a ditch at least 73 metres long. A deposit of seven cattle and three horse skulls was found in section 4105 of ditch 4043. "At least some of the skulls had been carefully cleaned and possibly displayed before ending up in the ditch and it may be that it was the display, rather than any act of deposition, that was important"<sup>31</sup>. One of the cattle skulls and the associated foreleg produced radiocarbon dates of between 790 BC and 420 BC. A number of the sections of ditch 4043 contained large finds assemblages. Human remains (lower limb fragments) were recovered from ditch sections 4079, 4090, and 4096 and animal bone groups from ditch sections 4090 and 4105, and all the excavated sections contained relatively large quantities of pottery and bone. Other finds included a number of quernstone and whetstone fragments as well as worked bone objects and flint hammerstones<sup>32</sup>.

As the deposits from ditch 4043 show, the early inhabitants of Battlesbury Bowl buried bones or bone fragments in pits and ditches. Human bone was recovered from 29 contexts within 21 features at the settlement. Disarticulated bones, or more commonly fragments of bones, were recovered from 25 contexts, mostly Late Bronze Age to early Middle Iron Age in date, predominantly pit fills and, less commonly, ditch and post-hole fills. The fragments mostly comprise elements of long bone and skull vault. Of the former, femur shaft predominates (the femur shaft is the body of the thigh bone). Not all fragments could be sided, but 60% of the assemblage comprises bone from the right (including right femur and right humerus)

compared with only 21% from the left side. Canid gnawing (gnawing by dogs, foxes or wolves), evident from the crenulated (serrated), worn ends of bone fragments and extant puncture marks, was observed in 28% of the disarticulated bone assemblage. The skeletal elements in which gnawing was observed are predominantly the larger long bones (femur, tibia, and humerus). A higher percentage of the material from the ditches compared with that from the pits show evidence for gnawing<sup>33</sup>. The bone specialist Jacqueline McKinley concludes<sup>34</sup> that the Late Bronze Age–early Middle Iron Age material “all comprises disarticulated bone fragments (representing the remains of a minimum of three individuals) with common evidence for canid gnawing and some weathering. The form and nature of the material is indicative of some level of exposure linked to deliberate human manipulation involving excarnation and possible ‘curation’.” In other words, the bones show evidence of having been gnawed by dogs, foxes or wolves, and of having been “curated” – in other words, kept as souvenirs of the deceased.

Towards the end of its life, burial practices changed at Battlesbury Bowl. Two later Middle Iron Age pits (350 BC – 200 BC) contained inhumation burials. Pit 4223 contained two crouched inhumation burials. The body, of a man aged over 40 years, was laid on its right side with its head to the west. “A horse lower mandible had been placed over the pelvis, and a fragment of bone from another adult (aged over 18 years) was also recovered from this level. Although a layer of soil was recorded between the two inhumations, it is possible that the two burials were not separated by any great length of time. The upper skeleton, of an adult female aged 35–55 years, was more tightly crouched, lying on its left side and with the head to the east, and further fragments of horse mandible were recovered from the surrounding soil.”<sup>35</sup> Pit 4332 contained a crouched inhumation, a juvenile aged about 10 years, possibly a male; associated with the burial were “a Neolithic flint axe, part of a chalk loomweight, and three articulated sheep/goat vertebrae”<sup>36</sup>. Both the burial and the animal bones produced radiocarbon

dates in the range 410-190 BC<sup>37</sup>.

### *Dorset*

Gussage All Saints is an Iron Age settlement on Cranborne Chase which was excavated in 1972. The site was occupied throughout the second half of the 1st millennium BC and into the early decades of the Roman period. The enclosure ditch, irregular and asymmetrical, measured 120 metres north-south and 100 metres east-west internally. There appears to have been an external bank. Three main phases of occupation were identified. The site produced a considerable assemblage of pottery from all 3 phases, and bronze and iron working occurred in all phases. "The most notable metalwork deposit was from a single pit close to the site's main entrance, and dating to the 1st century BC. It consisted of a large assemblage of mould and metalworking debris arising from the production of harness and chariot fittings. Remains of over 50 individuals were found, mostly from the last phase"<sup>38</sup>. Among the human remains was a tightly crouched male skeleton lying on its side with head to the north facing west. The arms and legs were flexed, with the arms drawn up in front of the chest. The skeleton was found in a deposit at the base of a cylindrical pit 6 feet 5 inches deep along with numerous animal bones and the articulated remains of dog and horse. Fragments of a right femur (thigh bone) and fibula (calf bone) were found in the same pit<sup>39</sup>. There were numerous remains of horses on the site, including 66 entire long bones<sup>40</sup>.

### *Somerset*

Glastonbury Lake Village is a mile to the north of Glastonbury in Somerset, and flourished between about 200 BC and 50 BC. It was built "on an artificial island of timber, stone and clay which lay in a swampy area of open water, reeds and fenwood. In its early stages the site comprised five or six houses, one of which burnt down, and a series of clay spreads that provided bases for outdoor work. The island was later extended, and more houses built. The site appears to have been permanently occupied despite its

location meaning that everything had to be brought in by boat. At its maximum Glastonbury Lake Village consisted of about 15 houses and had a population of, perhaps, 200. The houses were circular with walls of vertical posts in-filled with wattle and daub; roofs were thatched with reeds or straw. Many of the clay floors were constructed for hearths, some for cooking and warmth, others for industrial purposes. The site was surrounded by an irregular palisade which was probably more structural than defensive and there was a landing stage on the eastern side”<sup>41</sup>.

Glastonbury was excavated between 1892 and 1908 by Arthur Bulleid and Harold St. George Gray, who comment on one particular find<sup>42</sup>: “One of the most interesting objects of bone from the Village is the disc or roundel ... of human skull bone—part of the table of the of the occipital bone of an old person.” This disc was “of concavo-convex section,” measuring almost 3 inches in diameter and a third of an inch in thickness. It was “perforated centrally” by a hole a third of an inch in diameter on the external surface, but slightly larger on the inner side. Its precise use, they say, “is unknown, but it is generally regarded as an amulet or charm for superstitious purposes, and may have been worn on the person. The edges are very smooth.”<sup>43</sup>

### *Hampshire*

Suddern Farm is an Iron Age settlement at Over Wallop to the southwest of Andover, not far from Danebury hillfort. The site consisted of a medium-sized double or treble-ditched enclosure of around 5 acres. It was excavated in 1991 and 1996 as part of the Danebury Environs Project. Ceramic evidence indicated that the site was contemporaneous with Danebury. Excavation of a three-ditch linear earthwork identified to the southwest of the enclosure located a quarry that had been used as a cemetery from the Early to Middle Iron Age (700–100 BC). Human remains representing a minimum of 60 individuals were recovered, but it is estimated that several hundred further burials are present in the quarry. The human remains were recovered from graves (or quarry pits) dug directly into the chalk rubble

and silt. The skeletons from the Suddern Farm cemetery were recovered in various stages of articulation and were often accompanied by partial remains of several individuals. “Excavation showed that grave cuts did not respect previous interments and the absence of crania indicated selective removal post-decomposition. Accumulations of natural silts within some graves suggest that they had been left open whilst bodies decomposed.”<sup>44</sup>

### *Suffolk*

Mildenhall is in northwest Suffolk on the edge of the Fens, and a Late Bronze Age pit was excavated in Recreation Way, Mildenhall, 330 yards to the east of the present town centre. A large quantity of Late Bronze Age pottery provisionally dated to 1100–800 BC was recovered from the pit fills, particularly those from the upper half of the pit. Human skull and upper limb fragments were recovered from a deliberately dumped deposit within the pit. A large quantity of animal bone was recovered from fills throughout the pit consisting of cattle, caprovine (sheep or goat) and wild game<sup>45</sup>.

At Recreation Way, Mildenhall, there was also a Middle Iron Age rectangular enclosure, with two massive ditches (Diches 1 and 5) on the east and north side<sup>46</sup>. A number of inhumation burials and quantities of disarticulated human bone were cut into and contained within the fills of Ditch 5, and have been provisionally dated to the Middle Iron Age. Grave 21305 cut through lower ditch fill 21180 within Ditch 5 and contained a partial articulated skeleton. Middle Iron Age pottery and animal bone that may represent food offerings was recovered from the backfill. The grave was subsequently sealed by further ditch fills, some containing Middle Iron Age pottery. To the north, grave 21922 contained a partly complete adult skeleton and was identified cut into the middle fills of Ditch 5 during the watching brief<sup>47</sup>.

### *Cambridgeshire*

Godwin Ridge is a sand ridge 575m in length, flanked on all sides by the



channels of ancient streams, in the floodplain of the River Great Ouse, just above Earith, where the river flows into the southwestern Cambridgeshire peat fens. The ridge was investigated in 2008–9 as part of the Over Narrows phase of Barleycroft/Over Quarry project. In the late Bronze Age Godwin Ridge was a feasting site, but in the Iron Age it became a centre of ritual activities.

These activities were focused at the western edge of the ridge, on the northern riverside and a dumped-soil platform 7m by 10m and up to 0.3m thick. The platform's foundation layer contained the remains of four dismembered horses, and the disarticulated or partially articulated remains of a dog, two cows, a pig and 12 sheep, suggesting that it had a ritual purpose from the very beginning. Also associated with the platform "were the bones from at least fifteen different wild bird species, mostly coot, mallard, other ducks and great-crested grebe; swan, heron, bittern, crow and marsh harrier were also present, as was a Dalmatian pelican, a bird even larger than a swan that once bred in Britain... The bones were disarticulated, while some were broken or displayed signs of butchery, suggesting that at least some of the birds had been eaten or otherwise utilised." Three copper-alloy brooches were found close to each other, including a Thistle and a Colchester brooch and a rare, near-complete Nauheim type of late 2nd or earlier 1st century BC date. Nearby, at the riverside, there was "an unequivocal 'ritual package,' a discrete group of three antler weaving combs."<sup>48</sup>

Eighty-nine skeletal elements were found across the western half of the ridge, with the majority (fifty-six) deriving from the north-western end, where most (forty-eight) were spread across an area measuring 15 metres by 20 metres. The vast majority of the material "was loose and disarticulated. Altogether, portions of seven skulls were recovered from at least five adults, including a male and two females."<sup>49</sup> Canine gnawing was recorded on one tibia. There were also cut marks on a scapula and humerus, and a chop mark on a rib. These occurred "on fresh bone, with no evidence

of healing, suggesting that they were made at around the time of death, arguably in relation to dismemberment. The most marked ‘modification’ involved a polished occipital portion of an adult’s skull found along the northern channel side. Apart from shallow knife incisions, this included drilled holes arranged in a near-four-square pattern.” The holes were drilled after death with a rotating blade<sup>50</sup>.

### *Moray (Northeast Scotland)*

These strange burial practices were not confined to England. Sculptor’s Cave at Covesea on the Moray Firth, northeast Scotland, takes its name from a series of Pictish symbols carved on its entrance walls. Sylvia Benton carried out the first series of excavations in 1929 and 1930, finding evidence for two major periods of activity. On the basis of associated metalwork, the earliest cultural deposits are dated to the Ewart Park phase of the Late Bronze Age, around 1000-800 BC. A later occupation layer contained a rich assemblage of Roman Iron Age material (coins, rings, pins, beads, bracelets, toilet instruments etc), ranging from the 2nd to the 4th centuries AD. The most striking feature of Sculptor’s Cave is its “substantial assemblage of human remains”: Benton’s excavations seem to have recovered around 1800 human bones scattered throughout the deposits). In the late 1970s, Ian and Alexandra Shepherd carried out further excavations in the cave and found further Late Bronze Age metalwork and yet more bones, “including several mandibles from juveniles, perhaps reflecting the display of the severed heads at the entrance to the cave.” It has long been assumed that all the bones were of Late Bronze Age date, but radiocarbon dating of one of the bones produced a date of AD 231-395, within the period referred to as the Roman Iron Age. It is possible the bones “derive from two distinct episodes” in the life of the cave: a Late Bronze Age episode in which “the remains mainly of children were deposited in the cave, with some emphasis on the placing of heads at the entrance”, and a Roman Iron Age episode “represented by the remains of several decapitated individuals”<sup>51</sup>.

### *Hornish Point, South Uist (Northwest Scotland)*

Hornish Point on South Uist in the Outer Hebrides, northwest Scotland, is the site of an Iron Age wheelhouse (a type of roundhouse), possibly dating to between AD 69 and AD 240. The remains of a single individual were found buried in four different pits, in a disarticulated state<sup>52</sup>. The individual was around 12 years old, and possibly male. Three of the four pits also contained animal remains. Pit 1 held substantial parts of the skeleton of a young ox aged 18-30 months; Pit 2 produced substantial parts of two female sheep, aged over 3 years and 18-30 months at death; while Pit 4 contained much of a second young ox slightly older than the one in Pit 1 (p.90). It seems likely that the boy was deliberately killed, being struck from behind by an assailant using a sharp-bladed weapon with considerable force<sup>53</sup>.

## EVIDENCE FOR EXCARNATION AND SECONDARY BURIAL IN IRON AGE BRITAIN

### *Excarnation*

Judging from the bones buried in pits and ditches, many people in Iron Age Britain were subject to a process known as excarnation (de-fleshing) and secondary burial, with only selected bones (especially skulls and long bones being reburied). This may seem like a macabre practice to us, but it has a very clear religious motivation, as first set out by the early 20th century French sociologist Robert Hertz. Among many people who practise this burial rite even today or practised it until very recently (and that includes parts of rural Greece)<sup>54</sup>, it is believed that the soul of the deceased cannot leave the body until the flesh has decomposed. While the flesh is decaying, the deceased is neither alive nor dead, and is unable to enter the 'society of the dead' and leads a shadowy existence on the fringes of human habitation. Once the flesh is decayed, the dry bones are recovered, a great feast is held, the bones are given a second burial, and the deceased is then free to enter the land of the ancestors<sup>55</sup>.

### *Evidence from Dorset*

The osteoarchaeologist Rebecca Redfern has studied human bone from the Iron Age enclosure of Gussage All Saints and the hillfort of Maiden Castle, both in Dorset, for evidence of excarnation. Gussage St Michael was excavated by Geoffrey Wainwright, who recorded six contexts of disarticulated human remains recovered from a ditch and proposed hut structure, all dating to the 3rd century BC. The human remains consisted of 11 pieces of cranium (skull) and one femur (thigh bone), all from adult individuals. The cranial material was dominated by parietal bones (the bones which form the sides and roof of the cranium), and the most frequently observed changes were cut marks and fractures that occurred around the time of death. The thigh bone shows signs of gnawing, most probably by a dog<sup>56</sup>.

Redfern also examined eight pieces of disarticulated human bone from Maiden Castle hillfort near Dorchester. These bones were recovered from trenches II and IV from pit, gully, or post-hole fills and soil layers, which had been created during the extended fort phase (phase 6), dating to the Early–Middle Iron Age. Three pieces were long bones, the remainder cranial (skull) material. The long bones had evidence for dry fractures, gnawing and fine cut marks. The cranial material appears to have been formed by radiating fractures produced by blunt-force trauma, and cut marks are also present. All this implies that bodies were allowed to decay, being gnawed by dogs, foxes or wolves, and the bones were then removed and buried in pits, post-holes or gullies<sup>57</sup>.

MacArthur Cave at Oban, Argyll and Bute, western Scotland, is a Mesolithic shell midden, with a large number of bone implements; an antler from the midden was dated to 5730 – 5480 BC. During the excavation parts of the skeletons of at least four individuals were discovered; they were radiocarbon dated to between 800 BC and 50 BC, in the Iron Age. Large and small bones were found, including some with signs of gnawing, suggesting the deposition of complete bodies that were at least partially

accessible to scavengers during decomposition. MacArthur Cave therefore appears to provide “an important example of an excarnation site in Scotland dating from the Early Iron Age”<sup>58</sup>.

## IRON AGE CEMETERIES IN EAST YORKSHIRE

Excarnation and burial of selected bones in pits or ditches was widespread in Britain, with the notable exception of East Yorkshire. East Yorkshire is famous for the so-called Arras culture, named after a cemetery at Arras near Market Weighton, which is characterised by crouched inhumations in square barrows, sometimes with the remains of carts, either placed upright, or dismantled, the wheels being placed flat. Grave goods include cart- and harness-fittings such as iron cart-tyres and three-link horse-bits, and personal ornaments and offerings. These burials were not a local innovation, but were inspired by burials in France, particularly in Burgundy and the Nanterre-Paris region<sup>59</sup>. Such burials are found across the Yorkshire Wolds, from Market Weighton in the south to Hunmanby in the north, and also just to the north of the Wolds in the Vale of Pickering, dating to between around 400 BC and 100 BC.

The cemetery at Arras to the east of Market Weighton contained at least 100 small barrows each covering a single contracted or extended inhumation. The majority of these barrows were excavated between 1815 and 1817 by the Rev E W Stillingfleet and a chariot-burial was discovered in a chalk-pit here in 1876<sup>60</sup>. In the ‘King’s Barrow’ at Arras there was a single extended inhumation with the bodies of two horses, one laid on either side. The wheels from the vehicle had been removed and propped against each of the horses. Close to the head of the burial had been placed two pigs’ heads.

A number of Arras culture cemeteries have been excavated since the 19th century. To the west of Driffield are two adjacent cemeteries referred to as Garton Slack and Wetwang. Garton Slack was in use almost continually from the Neolithic to the Roman period. The Neolithic was represented by a

cremation pit with traces of cremated bone and a crouched burial, and two pits containing Grooved Ware. The Bronze Age was represented by two barrow sites both with single cremations, one with a secondary (additional) burial and food vessel. A grave with a crouched burial, jet buttons, beads and bronze leaf beads was also found on the site. In the Iron Age there were six square ditched barrows, four containing crouched burials, and a square ditched barrow, 12m square with crouched inhumation and “chariot burial of a type belonging to the dismantled horseless chariot series” of East Yorkshire<sup>61</sup>.

Excavation of Wetwang Slack has revealed several Bronze Age round barrows, part of a large Iron Age cemetery and a Romano-British farmstead. The section of the Iron Age cemetery “contained over 250 burials, 150 of which were under square ditched barrows ranging in size from 9 x 8 metres to a few square metres in area. The primary burials were adult, contained mostly in planked coffins with food offerings and grave goods. Children were found as secondary burials or in flat graves. Traces of cloth survive as iron oxide on grave goods indicating that the bodies were clothed or shrouded when buried.” The cemetery is dated from the second half of the 2nd century to the first half of the 1st century BC<sup>62</sup>. There were three chariot burials in close proximity to each other. All three were buried in pits set beneath rectangular ditched barrows. In each case the body was flexed and was placed together with grave goods in a box structure, presumably the body of the vehicle, above the two wheels of the cart which had been dismantled and laid side by side on the ground beneath. “Burial 1, that of a young male, was accompanied by chariot- and harness-fittings, a long sword, seven spears, iron coverings for the spine of a wooden shield and the forequarters of a pig. In Burial 2, in addition to the vehicle and harness parts, there were personal possessions, including a mirror, a decorated bronze box of cylindrical form with a chain for suspension, and a gold and iron pin decorated with coral; two forequarters of pig were placed over the stomach of the dead person. The third burial, like the first, was

accompanied by weaponry – a large iron sword, together with its suspension rings and iron fittings for the shield”<sup>63</sup>.

Around 15 chalk figurines were found at Garton Slack. Ian Stead<sup>64</sup> identifies a chalk figurine from Withernsea near the East Yorkshire coast as the finest example of this group, which are found only in East Yorkshire:

Between forty and fifty figurines are now known and many represent a warrior, usually carrying a sword on his back. Most of the figurines come from Iron Age or Roman sites, and all the swords are shown in scabbards suspended about their midpoint—a fashion known in northern Britain in the Iron Age. The warrior represented is presumably a god, mythical figure or ancestor, and the figurines may well have had a ritual or magical function.

A square barrow cemetery at Rudston was excavated by Stead 1968-76, in “the first modern excavation of an Arras culture cemetery.” The sites of 154 barrows “were completely or partially excavated, the majority of the barrows contained a central grave. The typical barrow was between 4 and 5.4 metres square, but the smallest was only 3 metres across. Fewer than half of the barrows that were more than 7 metres across contained a central grave. 135 graves orientated north-south were excavated along with 54 east-west orientated burials. The north-south burials were either crouched or contracted, and the east-west burials were normally extended or flexed. The type of grave goods varied between the two types of burial, though both groups contained male and female inhumations”<sup>65</sup>. The grave goods of the north-south burials were modest, largely restricted to a brooch, a clay pot or a sheep’s left humerus (front leg), while the east-west burials were more lavishly furnished, containing swords, spears, knives, sickles, ornaments and tools, as well as pig bones<sup>66</sup>.

## REINCARNATION IN IRON AGE BRITAIN?

### *The Evidence from Classical Writers*

The Roman general Julius Caesar famously said in his *Commentaries on the Gallic War*, that the Celtic priests known as the Druids believed in reincarnation<sup>67</sup>:

They wish to inculcate this as one of their leading tenets, that souls do not become extinct, but pass after death from one body to another, and they think that men by this tenet are in a great degree excited to valor, the fear of death being disregarded.

The same point was made by Diodorus Siculus, a Greek writer from Sicily, writing a few years after Caesar, when he says of the Gauls<sup>68</sup>:

it is their custom, even during the course of the meal, to seize upon any trivial matter as an occasion for keen disputation and then to challenge one another to single combat, without any regard for their lives; for the belief of Pythagoras prevails among them, that the souls of men are immortal and that after a prescribed number of years they commence upon a new life, the soul entering into another body.

It seems clear that the people buried in the cemeteries of East Yorkshire believed in an afterlife, but what did the people who practiced excarnation believe? Maud Cunnington, in her account of the excavation of Yarnbury Castle hillfort, speculated that the “careless methods of burial” in that and other settlements might be due to a belief in reincarnation. This of course is impossible to prove (or disprove), and all we can do is look at other cultures. Excarnation was widespread in prehistoric Europe, including among the Bronze Age Mycenaeans of the Greek Peloponnese<sup>69</sup>. They had a writing system borrowed from the Minoans of Crete, but this was used for administrative purposes, and all we learn of their religion is that they worshipped virtually the same gods as those of classical Greece.

## PYTHAGORAS, REINCARNATION, AND THE AMBER TRADE

So it is unlikely that the Mycenaeans believed in reincarnation, but



reincarnation did emerge as a belief in the late 6th/early 5th century BC, not in Greece proper, but in the Greek colonies of southern Italy, promoted by the Greek philosopher Pythagoras<sup>70</sup>. Where Pythagoras' beliefs came from is a mystery, but they may have come with amber from the Baltic. We don't know who lived around the Baltic in the time of Pythagoras, but Finno-Ugric peoples, including the Finns of Finland and the Estonians of Estonia may have settled around the Baltic in the Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age (2000-1500 BC)<sup>71</sup>, and may have controlled the amber trade. They are the only peoples currently living in Europe who are known to have held recent beliefs about reincarnation, apart from the Sami living in the Arctic regions of Scandinavia. Most of the information we have dates from the 19th or 20th centuries, but we must assume that Finno-Ugric peoples also believed in reincarnation in the prehistoric period.

The Sami people, traditionally known as Lapps or Lapplanders, are also a Finno-Ugric people, inhabiting the Arctic area of Sapmi, which today encompasses parts of far northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of Russia. The Sami practiced their traditional religion until the 18th century, when efforts were made to convert them to Christianity. A form of reincarnation "occurred in Sami tradition, by which a pregnant woman or shaman might see a vision of a dead relative in a dream and determine to name a new child after the deceased. This act was seen as allowing the dead to return to the family as a living member and has extensive parallels in other Arctic cultures"<sup>72</sup>

Reincarnation also plays an important part in the Finno-Ugric ceremonial bear hunt, which "sought to remove a fierce competitor from the local environment, while winning its power for the hunter and community and assuring its eventual reincarnation or return to the sky. Among Sami or Balto-Finns, such hunts included selection of the hunter by divination or lots, a welcoming of the slain bear's carcass as an honored guest or even wedding partner, ceremonial consumption of the bear's meat, recounting of its mythic origins in the sky, and placement of its bones and skull in a place

of honor (such as a sacred grove or fir tree, or, in tundra areas, a stone cairn). Aspects of this tradition survived among Sami and Finns into the 18th and 19th centuries and find close parallels among the Finno-Ugric Khanty and Mansi peoples of Russia as well”<sup>73</sup>.

The Khanty are an indigenous people living in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug of western Siberia (Russia), speaking a language belonging to the Ugric branch of the Finno-Ugric group of languages. The Khanty believe in reincarnation, and every new-born Khant “is seen as the reincarnation of a deceased member of the tribe. Thus, the birth of a child is accompanied by ceremonies designed to establish the reincarnated identity within the newborn and to give the infant the suitable ancestral name”<sup>74</sup>.

All this suggests that Pythagoras could have acquired a belief in reincarnation from Finno-Ugric peoples living on the Baltic by way of the amber trade (amber was imported into Mycenaean Greece, and into Late Bronze Age and Iron Age Italy, where it was popular among the Etruscans). Amber is often found in Early Bronze Age graves in Britain, and, to a lesser extent, in Ireland, and if Iron Age Britons believed in reincarnation, they too could have acquired such beliefs by way of the amber trade.

As I said, there is no proof that some people in Iron Age Britain or Ireland believed in reincarnation, but there is one tiny clue. Humans, or parts of humans, were buried with animals, or parts of animals, at Danebury in Hampshire, Battlesbury Bowl in Wiltshire, Witthenham Clumps in Oxfordshire, and Hornish Point in the Outer Hebrides, Scotland, suggesting some sort of equivalence between human and animals. Pythagoras apparently believed that humans could be reborn as animals<sup>75</sup> – does this human-animal pairing in death suggest that some Iron Age Britons shared a similar belief? I’ll return to this question later, when I look at the connection between Celtic saints and animals, and animal resurrection stories involving Celtic (mainly Irish) saints.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Roman Britain (1): People and Places*

#### SOUTHWEST ENGLAND

##### *Devon and Cornwall*

In 43 AD the Romans invaded Britain, and by the end of the 1st century Britain as far north as Hadrian's Wall was part of the Roman Empire. On several occasions Roman legions tried to conquer Scotland, and for a time in the 2nd century the border of the Empire was formed by the Antonine Wall, which stretched from the Firth of Forth to the Firth of Clyde – but this was short lived. After the invasion, the Romans set up a system of tribal capitals, small towns and villas, and I'm going to survey these, focusing on those that are relevant to the story of British folklore.

The tribal capital of Devon and Cornwall was *Isca Dumnoniorum*, now Exeter in Devon, the tribal capital of the *Dumnonii*. *Dumnonii* is identical to the (Fir) Domnann of Connacht in the west of Ireland, and the word is related to Welsh *dwfn*, “deep,” and Irish *domhain*, “deep.”<sup>1</sup> Clearly the *Dumnonii* were Celtic, with possible links to Ireland. The name *Dumnonii* survives in the post-Roman kingdom of Dumnonia, first mentioned in the 6th century, and in the modern county of Devon. The name *Isca* survives in the River Exe, which flows through Exeter, and in the River Usk in south Wales, which flows through Newport. There were also a number of forts in Devon, occupied in the 1st century AD – among these is *Nemetostatio* (“road-station of the sacred grove”) at Lapford to the north of Dartmoor, whose name is partly Celtic (see Old Irish *neimed*, “sanctuary”)<sup>2</sup>. The identity of the “sacred grove” is unknown, but nearby, at Bow, a probable Neolithic henge is visible as cropmarks on air photographs. The enclosure

is sub-oval and is a maximum of 60m across. Two roughly opposed entrances are visible, on the west and east sides. Within the enclosed area are cropmarks representing an irregular oval arrangement of 19 large post holes or pits. The monument is just visible on the ground, the bank surviving to a height of 0.3m and up to 1.5m wide. Fieldwalking has recovered over 800 flints from the field, including Mesolithic types as well as later Neolithic arrowheads and scrapers<sup>3</sup>.

Cornwall saw little Roman occupation apart from a number of short lived forts. The 7th century Ravenna Cosmography mentions a *Durocornovium*, with a route sequence going west from Exeter, and this has been identified with Tintagel in north Cornwall. As Professors Leo Rivet and Colin Smith have suggested in *The Place-Names of Roman Britain*, with the exception of Exeter, all the places named in it must have been minor in Roman times<sup>4</sup>.

It is possible that they were derived from some earlier list kept for administrative purposes. If a recognised route ended at Tintagel it would explain why, of the five Roman milestones found in Cornwall, one was discovered in 1889 in the entrance to the churchyard, and a second came from within a mile. The excavated finds include both post-Roman imports, locally made pottery of the 3rd and 4th century, coarse wares and a fourth century Oxfordware bowl. Thomas had noted that Tintagel was the site of a defended-promontory settlement, known in the area as 'the fort (duro) of the Cornovii' which became in the later Roman period an administrative post for the enforced gathering of taxes in the long north Cornish farming belt and for other duties ie. customs due to its coastal location.

Durocornovium means "Fort of the Cornovii", and it was the Cornovii who gave their name to Cornwall. The name Cornovii appears to be related to Latin *cornu*, "horn," Breton *kern*, "peak, summit," Irish *cern*, "angle, corner; excrescence, swelling," Gaulish *carnyx*, "trumpet," and Welsh *karn*, "hoof."<sup>5</sup> Cornovii is probably a Latin spelling, and its worth pointing out

that in the Cornish language Cornwall is Kernow.

### *Dorset*

The main Roman settlement in Dorset was *Durnovaria* (Dorchester), founded in the first decades of the Flavian period (69-96 AD). The first element of Durnovaria is found in Welsh *dwrn*, “fist,” while the second element, found in the tribal name Treveri, is related to Old Indian *var*, *vari*, “water,” Old Norse *vari*, “liquid, water,” Latin *urinor*, “to plunge under water, dive”<sup>6</sup> (the Treveri lived in the lower valley of the Moselle, around the German city of Trier). Durnovaria was associated with the Durotriges, whose name has defied interpretation. All we can say for certain is that the *var* element in Durnovaria is very old, possibly belonging to the Indo-European language that preceded Celtic.

There was also a Roman settlement on the southern edge of Cranborne Chase called Vindocladia (Celtic “White Ditches”, related to Old Irish *find* and Welsh *clawdd*)<sup>7</sup> near the Iron Age hillfort of Badbury Rings, whose precise location remained elusive for many years. In the dry summer of 1976, a pilot spotted the outline of a Roman fort in the fields beside Shapwick, on the River Stour to the southwest of Badbury Rings. Shapwick still has signs of its Roman past: the High Street follows the line of the old Roman road from Salisbury to Dorchester. In 1991 the archaeologist Martin Papworth examined a field beside the fort and found part of a grinding stone, fragments of mosaic and painted plaster and a collection of pottery dating from the 1st to 4th century AD. A geophysical survey was carried out which revealed roads, buildings and property boundaries and an array of rubbish pits and post-holes. Since then, the archaeologists have built up a picture of the place. “It extends from the river, continues under the village and below the fields as far as an escarpment overlooking Badbury Rings. This place was already important in the Iron Age, and it grew after the Roman Conquest, when round houses were gradually replaced by increasingly sophisticated rectangular houses.” The fort is a rare thing for the south of England. It was not a Roman conquest fort but a “burgus” (a

late Roman fort), “dating from the late 4th century, when the province of Britannia was under attack and a secure place was needed. In one corner of the fortification, the geophysics shows what looks like a government inn and relay station (*mansio*)”<sup>8</sup>.

### *Wiltshire*

There was no tribal capital in Wiltshire, but there were a number of small towns, including *Sorviodunum*. *Sorviodunum* was established at the foot of the Iron Age hillfort known as Old Sarum, to the north of Salisbury, about which little is known (much of the archaeology was probably destroyed by the 11th century Norman castle and cathedral). *Sorviodunum* bears a name which is similar to *Sorviodurum*, near the city of Straubing on the River Danube in Bavaria. The origin of the first element *Sorvio-* is unclear. Perhaps the most popular explanation is that it is derived from the Indo-European root *ser-1*, “to flow”, found in Latin *serum*, “the watery part of curdled milk, whey,” *Saravus*, “a river in Gaul” (now called the Saar): *Sorviodunum* is close to the Salisbury Avon, and *Sorvio-* may represent the old name for the River Avon near Salisbury. The Anglo-Saxons probably thought that it was derived from the Indo-European root *ser-4*, “to put together, bind together,” which gives Gothic *sarwa*, “armor,” Anglo-Saxon *searu*, “armor.” Finally it could be derived from the Indo-European root *ser-2*, “to guard, watch over, support,” which gives Avestan (Old Iranian) *haurvaiti*, “he guards,” *pasus-haurvo*, “cattle-guardian,” Latin *servo*, “to watch, keep safe.”<sup>9</sup>

Another small town in Wiltshire was *Verlucio*, to the north of Devizes, situated near Bell Farm, less than a mile southeast of the village of Sandy Lane, in the parish of Calne Without. Numerous finds of iron slag and kiln debris have been found in the fields to the north of Hayfields Copse by Chippenham College Archaeology group, and it seems likely that the Romans were exploiting iron as a resource in this area. Romano-British coins, nails and pottery fragments were found during excavations in 1840 west of Bell Farm. Additionally, a Romano-British structure was discovered

in a test pit behind Bell Farm and a great deal of building material including pennant stone tiles and iron nails, which are likely to have been made locally, have been found in the area indicating the presence of other structures. A large and varied amount of pottery has been found at the site of Verlucio, suggesting the site was widely involved in trade (Verlucio lay on the Roman road from London to Bath). An analysis of coins found on the site suggests occupation from around 80 AD to 160 AD, followed by a long period of urban settlement lasting from the 3rd to the 5th century<sup>10</sup>. Verlucio is Celtic, meaning “Very Bright Place” (see Welsh *gor-*, *gwor-*, “over, very”, *llug*, “light, radiance”)<sup>11</sup>.

Recently a Roman settlement has been identified near Silbury Hill in Avebury (Silbury Hill is a large Late Neolithic mound near Swallowhead Spring, one of the sources of the River Kennet, which stands to a height of 31 metres with a diameter of 135-145 metres and is surrounded by a wide ditch which extends in the west to form a “tank” that is often flooded in winter). According to English Heritage, parchmarks of a Roman settlement consisting of rectilinear enclosures containing buildings are visible to the east of Silbury Hill. Finds of other Roman occupation debris south of this site indicate that the settlement stretched as far as the A4 road (once a Roman Road) and extended south beyond it. The settlement appears to have been occupied throughout the Roman period and into the 5th century AD. The substantial nature of the buildings revealed in the Kennet Foul Sewer Pipeline trench suggests that the settlement may be of high status with administrative functions and its location near major prehistoric monuments may indicate a religious focus. The settlement can be seen on aerial photographs aligned north-east/south-west along a central roadway with enclosures containing the remains of a number of buildings. Further evidence for extensive Roman settlement around Silbury Hill has come from geophysical survey, revealing a “ladder style” layout and possible evidence for masonry buildings<sup>12</sup>.

*Somerset*

One of the main towns in Somerset was *Lindinis* (now Ilchester), which was established between 55 – 60 AD, and consisted of a ‘ribbon-development’ of wattle and daub huts beside the Fosse Way (the Roman road from Exeter to Lincoln) surrounded by a ditch and earthen bank<sup>13</sup>. The wattle and daub huts were replaced with more substantial stone buildings from the late 2nd/early 3rd centuries and by the 4th century there is evidence of elegant houses with mosaic floors<sup>14</sup>. The name *Lindinis* is Celtic, related to Welsh *llyn*, ‘pond, pool’.

### *Gloucestershire*

*Corinium Dobunnorum* (now Cirencester in Gloucestershire) was the tribal capital of the Dobunni. The origin of the tribal name Dobunni is unknown, while the origin of *Corinium* is obscure. Rivet and Smith, in *The Place-names of Roman Britain*, link the name to *Corinium* in Liburnia, a coastal region of what is now Croatia. The first element of Cirencester is believed to be etymologically connected with the nearby villages of North and South Cerney and the River Churn, which flows through all three places. It is therefore possible that the original name was *Cironium*, but became *Corinium* under the influence of the Liburnian name<sup>15</sup>.

The name Glevum (now Gloucester) derives from a word related to the Welsh *gloyw* “bright, shining,” perhaps referring to a river. Gloucester is on the River Severn, which in Roman times was called *Sabrina*. The name is connected to other river names such as the *Sambre* in northern France and Belgium, the *Sèvre* in western France, and the *Sabrann* in Ireland (the old name for the River Lee in Cork). It may be related to Latin *sapa* “must, grape juice,” Illyrian *sabaium* “beer,” English *sap*<sup>16</sup>.

## WALES

### *Caerwent*

There were two tribal capitals in Wales, *Caerwent* and *Carmarthen*. *Caerwent*, or *Venta Silurum*, in southeast Wales, was the capital of the



Silures. *Venta* is the same element as in Venta Belgarum/Winchester, while the origin of the name Silures is uncertain: the only comparable name is Silurus Mons to the north of Malaga in southern Spain, which was mentioned by the Latin writer Avienus in his *Ora maritima* (4th century AD). It may be derived from *silo-riks*, “indicating an agricultural population group “rich” (Celt. *-rix*) in seeds or crops (Celt. *silo-*).”<sup>17</sup>

### *Caerleon*

To the west of Caerwent was the legionary fortress of Caerleon, on the northern edge of Newport, which in Roman times was known as Isca, presumably named after the River Usk. Underlying the modern town of Caerleon are the “remains of a vast and magnificent Roman legionary fortress.” The fortress lay at the centre of an extensive settlement fringed by cemeteries, covering in all an area of perhaps 250 acres. It was occupied throughout the Roman period and its ruins dominated the town well into the middle ages<sup>18</sup>.

### *Carmarthen*

The other tribal capital was Moridunum (Carmarthen) in southwest Wales, the capital of the *Demetae*. Moridunum is Celtic, meaning “Sea Fort,” while the origins of the name Demetae are obscure – Koch suggests it could be linked to *dafad* “sheep,” in the sense of “tame, domestic.”<sup>19</sup> The word *dafad* is from the Indo-European root *deme-*, *dome-* “to tame,” which also gives Old Indian *damyati* “is tamed,” *damita-* “tamer,” Latin *domitum* “tamed,” *domitor* “tamer,” Old Irish *damnaim* “tame,” *damnad* “taming,”<sup>20</sup>.

### *Caernarfon*

There was also a Roman fort in north Wales called Segontium (Caernarfon), on the Menai Strait opposite Anglesey. Archaeological excavations have shown that it accommodated a regiment of auxiliary infantry of up to 1,000 soldiers. Coins recovered from excavations show that it was garrisoned until about 394 AD. Such a long occupation was unique in Wales, and was possibly due to the strategic position of the fort, controlling access to the

fertile and mineral rich lands of Anglesey and by its later role in the defence of the Welsh coast against Irish raiders and pirates. Throughout the Roman period, Segontium was the military and administrative centre of north-west Wales<sup>21</sup>.

### *Brecon Gaer*

Brecon Gaer Roman fort at Yscir near Brecon in Powys is a Roman auxiliary fort represented by a round-angled rectangular walled enclosure about 195m by 146m, covering an area of 2.8ha. It was extensively excavated between 1924 and 1925 by Mortimer Wheeler, with some more recent work. A large area around the fort has recently been subject to geophysical survey on behalf of the Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust. The fort was occupied by a unit of cavalry, some 500 strong, in the late 1st and earlier 2nd century. Some form of occupation continued through to the end of the Roman period, although it is unsure what this involved. Initially a turf and timber fort, the wall, gates and the buildings of the central range were rebuilt in stone. The internal buildings included a small bath house and a large 'riding school' or drill hall. There was an extensive extramural settlement that included several official buildings and many 'strip buildings' laid out on a network of streets. Stone funerary monuments found to the north indicate the site of a cemetery<sup>22</sup>.

## THE WEST MIDLANDS AND NORTHWEST ENGLAND

### *Herefordshire*

*Ariconium* at Weston under Penyard, 2 miles east of Ross-on-Wye in the south of Herefordshire, lay at the junction of two known Roman roads. First discovered by chance in 1758 the town has been the subject of several excavations, field walking and aerial reconnaissance over many years. It is known to occupy a roughly rectangular area and includes domestic houses, streets, industrial premises (including iron works), shops, civic and commercial premises and burial sites which all survive as buried structures,

layers and deposits, many visible as crop and soil marks on aerial photographs. The settlement began in the Iron Age and had its origins in the trading links with the iron producing areas of the Forest of Dean. "Domestic settlement with finds including pottery and tesserae from the early 2nd century continued into the 3rd century and thereafter steadily declined with few artefacts from domestic situations known after 350 AD. The iron working which began in the north and continued in the south western part of the town did continue well into the 4th century and furnaces are known."<sup>23</sup>.

### *Shropshire*

*Viroconium* (Wroxeter in Shropshire) was the tribal capital of the Cornovii. The meaning of *Viroconium* is uncertain, and the Cornovii are something of an enigma. A tribe with an identical or similar name was also located in Cornwall, where the Cornovii formed a kingdom after Dumnonia/Devon became part of Anglo-Saxon England and in Caithness, northeast Scotland. As I said earlier, the name Cornovii appears to be related to Latin *cornu*, "horn," Breton *kern*, "peak, summit," Irish *cern*, "angle, corner; excrescence, swelling," Gaulish *carnyx*, "trumpet," and Welsh *karn*, "hoof." It seems likely that the name referred to high places or horn-shaped landscape features: Shropshire has The Wrekin, a hill 407 metres (1,335 feet) tall, which became the site of an Iron Age hillfort; Tintagel has a jagged headland projecting into the sea, and Cornwall has numerous coastal promontory forts like The Rumps near Padstow; and Caithness has coastal promontory forts like Poll Gorm at Latheron.

Llanymynech Hill is on the border with Montgomeryshire in Wales, and a good deal of Romano-British material has been encountered in copper-workings in the Ogof cavern, including coin hoards and burials of the 2nd-4th century AD. Excavations in 1981 on the Llanymynech Hill enclosure defences indicate metalworking from a local source from around 200 BC<sup>24</sup>.

Roman Gravels lead mine is situated on steeply sloping land in the Hope Valley, approximately half-a-mile north of the village of Shelve in west

Shropshire near the border with Montgomeryshire in Wales. It is one of a group of lead mines in the area which were of great significance in the lead industry of the 19th century and earlier. Prior to 1850 the site was known as Gravels or Shelfefield Gravels. “The discovery by miners in the 19th century of earlier shafts containing pottery and wooden shovels, as well as the discovery of Roman coins and a lead pig (ingot) in spoil, and the presence of Roman-style opencuts, suggest that the area was first mined during the Roman period, possibly around AD 120”<sup>25</sup>.

### *Cheshire*

The Roman Legionary Fortress at Chester was called by the Romans *Deva*, after the River Dee. With an area of 59.3 acres, it was built between 78-86 AD on a sandstone plateau enclosed by two arms of the River Dee and was occupied by the Legio II Adiutrix. Preceding this was a fort consisting of a timber box rampart with a soil core retained by planking, of pre-Flavian date (50-60 AD). The defences of the legionary fortress consisted of a turf rampart with interval towers surrounded by a ‘V’ shaped ditch. The Legio XX Valeria Victrix took over the fortress around 86 AD. Throughout the 2nd century the defences and internal buildings were replaced with stone. Early in the 3rd century the defences were refurbished. The ramparts and interval towers were heightened and widened. This was followed by a reconstruction of the fortresses internal buildings. At the end of the 3rd century there was widespread demolition of the internal buildings<sup>26</sup>.

Chester had the largest amphitheatre in Roman Britain. The first amphitheatre was built between 80-90 AD and had a stone outer wall, a central arena and a seating bank supporting timber seats. This was built against the stone wall with the spoil heap from the area. Soon after, the arena was deepened and a terrace of timber-framed seating was built, along with a new stairway for access. This work has been dated to 96 from a coin found in the foundation slot of one of the timbers. Possibly in the late 2nd century the amphitheatre was extended and enlarged. A new outer wall was built and seats in the upper tiers were now accessed by vomitoria (vaulted

stairways situated behind the seating)<sup>27</sup>.

Middlewich in Cheshire was a centre of salt production in the Roman period. "Roman salt-working at Middlewich was intensive during the early part of the 2nd century AD when a military presence provided an immediate need for the product. Much evidence has been found in the form of briquetage and lead pieces, presumably off-cuts from lead vats in which the Roman boiled the brine. Hearths and troughs for evaporation, brine tanks and pits, remains of timber buildings in which salt working took place, have all been found on the east side of the River Croco. At least 20 hectares were set aside for industrial production of salt, with the land parcelled off into small plots for individual workings, together with the houses of the workers, yards, storage areas and probable vegetable plots."<sup>28</sup>.

### *Derbyshire*

There was a town in the lead-mining district of Derbyshire called Lutudarum. Lutudarum is known from inscriptions on lead pig ingots and is also recorded in the Ravenna Cosmography. It may have been at Wirksworth or at nearby Carsington, both on the southern edge of the Peak District<sup>29</sup>. No Roman ruins have been found at Wirksworth, but Roman remains have been found at Carsington. Excavations in Brough Field, Shiningford Farm, uncovered a Roman settlement, consisting of three phases dating from circa 125-150 AD, around 200 AD and the 4th century AD. In the first phase the buildings were of timber with evidence for ovens and furnaces associated with lead working. The second phase consisted of stone buildings and an iron working furnace. In the fourth century the buildings were again of timber construction<sup>30</sup>.

### *Lancashire*

There was a Roman fort and settlement at Ribchester on the banks of the River Ribble. Excavations uncovered granaries, timber buildings, a pottery kiln, a bath house and pottery dating from 69 AD to the 4th century. The fort was probably abandoned in the later 2nd century AD. A Bronze Age

enclosed cremation cemetery consisting of 5 urned burials was also discovered<sup>31</sup>.

### *Cumbria*

The most northerly town in Roman Britain was *Luguvalium* (Carlisle in Cumbria), the capital of the Carvetii. The name of the Carvetii is related to Welsh *carw* and Latin *cervus*, and means the “Deer People,”<sup>32</sup> presumably referring to the emblem of their tribe. *Luguvalium* means “Town of Luguvalos”– *Luguvalos* is a personal name meaning “as strong as Lugus” (the name of an important Celtic god)<sup>33</sup>.

Castlesteads Roman fort in the north of Cumbria, known to the Romans as ‘Camboglanna’, is detached from the Wall line, being located 350m to the south of Hadrian’s Wall. “This is accounted for by the strength of the position the fort occupies and also the need for the Wall line to take a more gentle descent of the gorge to cross the Cam Beck. The fort is situated on a high bluff and was built here to command the Cam Beck valley. The fort survives as a low platform with most of its remains surviving as buried features. The surface remains of the fort were damaged by landscaping for Castlesteads house in 1791. The fort is now overlain by ornamental gardens ... The remains of the civil settlement, or vicus, which is usually associated with Roman forts, are not visible as upstanding features at Castlesteads. However, a letter from a certain Richard Goodman, writing to Gale in 1727, mentions traces of an extensive settlement on the slope at the south east front of the fort. He noted the existence of foundations of walls and streets which were being removed to construct new buildings and to allow the land to be ploughed”<sup>34</sup>.

Ravenglass Roman fort in the Lake District is located in Walls Plantation, 700 metres south of Ravenglass, adjacent to the coast, and bordered to the north and south by shallow ravines. Casual finds and limited excavations within the fort indicate an early Hadrianic fortlet constructed in around 122 AD. A later Hadrianic fort was built on the same site but on a different alignment in around 130 to consolidate the coastal defences. This fort

displays evidence of destruction by fire in around 197, 296 and 367, dates that mirror known periods of widespread turmoil in northern England. It was rebuilt after the final destruction but no date of final abandonment is known<sup>35</sup>. The bath house is situated just outside the north-east corner of the fort. “The remains of the bath house are among the tallest Roman structures surviving in northern Britain: the walls stand almost 4 metres (13 feet) high. Domestic use of the building in the Middle Ages led to the substantial preservation of the site. The site lay in Muncaster Castle Park in the post-medieval period, and was described as ‘the ancient dwelling place of the Penningtons’ by John Denton in 1610”<sup>36</sup>

## SOUTHEAST ENGLAND

### *Hampshire*

After the Romans invaded Britain in 43 AD. they established the town of *Venta Belgarum* (Winchester), the tribal capital of the Belgae, who had migrated from northern France in the 1st century BC. The element *Venta*, which is apparently unique to Britain, is found in two other Romano-British tribal capitals, and has long puzzled linguists. Rivet and Smith, in *The Place-names of Roman Britain*, argue that *Venta* is neither Latin nor Celtic but something else. They discuss what that something else might be, and one suggestion they make is that it could be related to *Vendum*, a place of the Japodes people, living in what is now Croatia and Bosnia, which J.G von Hahn identified as having a root meaning “place, space, country”. The linguist and place-name authority Richard Coates endorses this view, and links *Vendum* to Albanian *vend* “place”<sup>37</sup> – which implies that *Venta* is pre-Celtic, belonging to an earlier Indo-European language, possibly brought to Britain with the Beaker People from Central Europe in the Early Bronze Age. The later Anglo-Saxon settlers preserved the *Venta* element of the name, calling the town *Wintan-ceastre*, “Fort *Venta*”.

There was also a Roman villa at Rockbourne in Hampshire, on the eastern edge of Crnborne Chase and not far from the New Forest. The villa was

discovered in 1942 by a local farmer and excavated by A. T. Morley Hewitt over the next thirty years. The main structure was a large residence surrounding a courtyard, including luxurious Roman mosaics and bath suites. There were also farm buildings and workshops since it sat at the centre of large farming estate. Its origins lie in the Iron Age and it was occupied until the 5th century<sup>38</sup>. Not far from Rockbourne is Whitsbury Castle Ditches, a large multivallate Iron Age hillfort. The defences completely enclose the top of the hill apart from the south west where they have been destroyed by the building of a post medieval manor house and comprise of 3 earthen ramparts separated by 2 ditches. Excavation in 1960 found evidence of almost continuous use since the Mesolithic period. 57 flint tools and flakes were found while Bronze Age occupation is indicated by Grim's Ditch which extends beneath the hillfort defences from the north<sup>39</sup>.

### *The Belgic Towns*

In the Late Iron Age some Belgae from northern France migrated to England to escape the Roman occupation by Julius Caesar and his army in the 50s BC. One of the settlements they established was *Venta Belgarum*/Winchester, but there were several others in southeast England. *Calleva Atrebatum* (Silchester in Hampshire) was the capital of the Belgic *Atrebates*, who settled there around the time of Caesar's conquest of Gaul. *Calleva* probably means "Settlement in the Woods," related to Welsh *celli*, "wood."<sup>40</sup> The *Atrebates* originally lived around Arras in the Artois region of north-eastern France; their name is related to Old Welsh *treb* "dwelling," and Old Frisian *therp/thorp*, "village."<sup>41</sup>

Belgae also established a settlement at Colchester, or Camulodunum, in Essex. The oppidum (fortified settlement) surrounding Colchester covered an area of about 25 sq km mainly located between the converging courses of the River Colne and the Roman River to the west of the Colne estuary. In addition to the rivers, the settlement was defined and protected by the largest group of linear earthworks of the period in Britain. These developed



over a period of about one hundred years from the foundation of the settlement in the early first century BC. At Gosbecks, an extensive farmstead has been identified. This has been associated with Cunobelin (one of the most famous British kings prior to the Roman Conquest) and interpreted as a centre of political authority and religious practice. The rulers and occupants of Camulodunum may have fluctuated according to the relative fortunes of two rival tribal polities – the Trinovantes centred on modern Essex and the Catuvellauni based in modern Hertfordshire<sup>42</sup>. After the Roman conquest in 43 AD, Camulodunum became a legionary fortress. The Legion was soon removed and the settlement became a colony for retired veterans (Colonia Victricensis, meaning ‘City of Victory’)<sup>43</sup>.

*Verulamium* (St. Albans in Hertfordshire) was the capital of the Catuvellauni. The name *Catuvellauni* is close to *Catalauni*, a tribe who lived around Châlons-en-Champagne in the Marne region of northeastern France. The first element of their name is related to Gaulish *catu-*, “fight, struggle,” found in Caturix, a god worshipped in Switzerland and Germany, and in Old Irish *cath*”; while the second element is Gaulish *uellaunos*, “chief, commander,” related to Latin *valeo*, “to be strong,” Old Irish *falhn-*, *folhn-*, “to rule, reign,” *flaith*, “prince, lord”<sup>44</sup>.

## EAST ANGLIA

### *Suffolk*

Icklingham is on the River Lark, to the northwest of Bury St Edmunds and not far from Mildenhall. A large Roman lead vessel marked on one side with the Christian chi-rho symbol and on the other with the chi-rho flanked by omega and alpha, was discovered in 1939 about 150 yards from a Roman villa. A further lead cistern of the same type was found in 1971. “Excavations in 1974 at the spot where the lead cistern was found in 1971 ... revealed an early phase of disturbed pits and ditches, in one of which six unassociated human skulls and a limestone pillar were found.”<sup>45</sup>.

Foundations of three buildings were discovered, the central one measuring 4.6m by 6.7m externally. 10m to the east of this was a tile-built apse, 1.6m by 1.6m with a tiled floor and plastered interior. Near this were fragments of walls in which the lead cistern was originally found. To the north west of the central building were nine extended inhumation burials without grave-goods except for one coin. To the south was a group of 36 similar burials and one child burial, two of the inhumations having bronze bracelets as grave goods. Traces of wooden coffins showed up as soil stains and in the centre of the site was a stone coffin containing an extended inhumation without grave-goods. It is suggested that these buildings and graves form a Roman Christian cemetery and ritual centre probably of the 4th century AD.

The interpretation of the earlier features is unclear, although the skulls suggest a pagan shrine

### *Norfolk*

The main Roman town in Norfolk was *Venta Icenorum*, the tribal capital of the Iceni. The origins of the name *Iceni* are obscure. In Roman Gaul the River Yonne was called *Icauna*; this was also the name of a goddess attested at Auxerre, which lies on the Yonne to the southeast of Paris. The origins of Icauna are unknown, but it may be related to Latin *aqua* “water”, Old English *ea* “water”, and German *Ach/Aach*, now found only in river-names like Salzach, which flows through Salzburg in Austria, and Radolfzeller Aach, a tributary of the Rhine in Baden-Württemberg (Germany)<sup>46</sup>. The name Iceni is thought to be related to Itchen, the name of rivers in Warwickshire and Hampshire (coincidentally or not, Winchester lies on the Hampshire Itchen). Unlike *Venta Silurum* (Caerwent) and *Venta Belgarum* (Winchester), *Venta Icenorum* did not preserve its Roman name, though Caistor indicate the the Anglo-Saxon settlers knew that it was a Roman castra, or camp.

Great Walsingham is in north Norfolk and Roman finds have been made

at this site since the 1950s. Extensive metal detecting has recovered Roman coins, pottery, votive objects, brooches and building material. The enormous volume of finds of a religious nature indicate that this was a temple site. The site is part of a much larger Roman town. Ritual objects include representations of the Roman god Mercury, the messenger of the gods who also guided souls to the underworld, and satyrs and cupids probably relating to the god Bacchus. Pottery dating from the 2nd to the 4th century AD found on the site may relate to containers used for offerings of food and drink or ritual feasting. Over six thousand Roman coins, many perhaps gifts to the gods left at the temple, have also been recovered<sup>47</sup>.

### *Cambridgeshire*

Water Newton is 5 miles west of Peterborough and was the site of the Roman town of *Durobrivae*. Durobrivae was the centre of the largest industrial complex known in Roman Britain. It began as a small five-acre fort which was built shortly after 44 AD, at the point where Ermine Street (the road from London to Lincoln) crossed the River Nene. Gradually a town grew up to serve the needs of the fort and of travellers on Ermine Street, and was enclosed by ramparts in the late 2nd century. At least three other roads joined Ermine Street at or near the town, and the River Nene was navigable. This meant that Durobrivae was within easy reach of London, East Anglia, the Midlands, and the North. The main industries carried on here were ironworking and, most importantly, pottery making. The industrial complex grew up on both sides of the river, but mainly on the north bank at Normangate Field, and eventually covered a much larger area than the town itself. Elaborate and expensive villas have been found, especially at Castor, indicating the success of the pottery industry<sup>48</sup>.

## THE EAST MIDLANDS

### *Lincolnshire*

The Roman town of Lindum (Lincoln) was founded as a legionary fortress

in 47-48 AD; The Legio II Adiutrix probably left Lincoln in 77, and shortly afterwards the colonia was founded, primarily for soldiers of the 9th Legion. The original timber defences of the legionary fortress were removed and replaced in stone, and the enclosed area extended southwards to the River Witham. This, the “lower town” may have originally been the fort’s canabae (civilian settlement), although limited excavation has found little evidence of structures dating to the pre-colonia occupation period. Excavations have located the forum, a possible temple associated with the forum, and public baths, the Roman waterfront, and several minor buildings<sup>49</sup>.

## NORTHEAST ENGLAND

### *York*

The most important town in northeast England was the Roman legionary fortress and colonia of *Eboracum* (York). The name is related to Gallo-Roman *eburos* and Old Irish *ibar*, “yew.” The legionary fortress at York was built on the northeast bank of the River Ouse in AD 71 to house the 9th Legion. It occupied an area of 50 acres and included barracks and other buildings including a bathhouse and principia. The fortress was rebuilt in stone in AD 107–8. In the early 3rd century York was the headquarters of the Emperor Severus in his unsuccessful campaign to conquer Scotland. In the 4th century York became the military base of the Dux Britanniarum, the headquarters of the northern region<sup>50</sup>.

### *North Yorkshire*

*Isurium* was the tribal capital of the *Brigantes*, now Aldborough near Boroughbridge in North Yorkshire. The Brigantes have the same name as a tribe in Co. Wexford, southeast Ireland, and both tribes venerated the same goddess, called Brigantia in Britain and Brigid in Ireland<sup>51</sup>. The name means “Elevated Ones,” and the root survives in Welsh *bre*, “hill.”<sup>52</sup>

Cropton is on the southern edge of the North York Moors, and was the

site of Cawthorn Roman temporary camp and two forts, one with an annexe, surviving as earthworks. Limited finds evidence indicates a late 1st and early 2nd century AD date. Limited excavation in 1999-2000 in Fort A and Annexe B revealed evidence of multi-phase buildings and streets. Roman period pottery and melon glass beads were recovered and one building produced an archaeo-magnetic date of late 1st and early 2nd century date<sup>53</sup>.

### *County Durham*

There was a Roman fort known as *Concangis* at Chester-le-Street, which lies to the north of the town of Durham. Excavations revealed an “early” Roman fort, with a later probable refurbishment of 2nd century date. Finds over a large area also suggest the site of a vicus (civilian settlement)<sup>54</sup>. Further excavations in 1982 and 1983 uncovered traces of a possible Roman vicus and a later medieval settlement consisting of timber buildings<sup>55</sup>.

Ebchester in County Durham, close to the border with Northumberland, is the site of *Vindomara* Roman fort. Excavations have exposed the remains of a Roman fort of two phases dating from 69-117 AD, and from around 150 AD to the end of the 4th century. The possible site of the vicus is also recorded<sup>56</sup>.

### *Northumberland*

Housesteads Roman fort on Hadrian’s Wall in Northumberland is situated on the prominent crest of the Whin Sill escarpment with commanding views to the north and south. A vicus or civilian area was situated to the south and east. The fort site consists of largely consolidated masonry remains, making up the most complete example of a Roman Fort in Britain. Housesteads was constructed shortly after 122 AD on a “playing card” plan, the long axis parallel to the wall. During the early years the garrison appears to have been largely Tungrian, from Belgium or the Netherlands, accommodating a cohort of 800-1,000 strong before being later reinforced by a cavalry unit.

The defences were modified from the late 3rd century when there were radical alterations to the internal layouts of the barracks and granaries, and additional interval towers were added. Further modifications were made in the 4th century, notably the construction of a bath-house in one of the barracks blocks and the north wall of the fort was repaired. There is some evidence for further late repairs to the fort, which may not have been completely abandoned after the end of Roman rule. An apsidal ended building with a cist burial, which may have been a chapel or church, was constructed either very late in the Roman period or after the nominal end of Roman rule<sup>57</sup>.

## SCOTLAND

### *Scottish Borders*

Newstead Roman fort is near Melrose in the Scottish Borders. The fort was first excavated between 1905 and 1910 by Dr James Curle, who revealed the outline of the Roman fort, details of internal buildings, three annexe enclosures attached to the main fort, and a large temporary camp for the Roman army on the march<sup>58</sup>.

Outside the fort lay several annexes, and within these a number of deep pits were found. Many contained only rubbish, although this was interesting enough: broken pottery, leather shoes, animal bones, oyster and mussel shells, and pieces of wood. However some of the pits – especially those connected with the abandonment of the fort in the early second century – contained the most remarkable collection of objects yet found in Roman Scotland. The most striking discoveries were bronze and iron parade helmets belonging to auxiliary cavalrymen. But there were also items of horse harness, domestic implements, personal possessions, and tools for a wide range of crafts.

### *East Lothian*

Musselburgh Roman fort, 5 miles east of Edinburgh, in the grounds of St.

Michael's church, Inveresk, has been known since at least the 18th century, and was trenched by Richmond in 1946 and 1947. He established the line of the 22 foot wide rampart on the north, west, and south, giving external measurements of 480 feet north-south by 595 to 615 feet east-west, with the main entrance facing west. The line of the eastern rampart could be only approximately determined as trenching was not feasible – part of it lay under graves. An external ditch surrounded the fort. Traces of stabling would appear to indicate cavalry.

There was clear evidence for two Antonine periods of occupation but nothing to indicate a third phase. An As (copper coin) of Vespasian (69 – 79), found in the garden of Inveresk House in approximately 1931, would also appear to indicate a Flavian occupation<sup>59</sup>.

The best known tribe living on the frontiers of Roman Britain were the Votadini, who lived in southeast Scotland. The name *Votadini* is related to Irish *fothad*, “support”, and to a character in Irish mythology called Fothad, a warrior who never sat down at a feast without a severed head in front of him, illustrating his prowess as a warrior<sup>60</sup>. In Roman times the main stronghold of the Votadini was the hillfort of Traprain Law in East Lothian. It first came to public attention in 1919 with the discovery of the Traprain Law Treasure, a hoard of fine Roman silverware. “Most of the objects are table silver, but there are also specifically Christian objects (possibly from a church) as well as articles from a lady's dressing-table and from an officer's uniform. Few objects were found entire, most being cut or hacked into pieces and crushed flat; only parts of some were found ... Most of the pieces in the hoard would have been used in dining, and might have been displayed on the sideboard when not in use. They include parts of 8 large jugs (probably used for wine), 5 wine goblets, 50 bowls, 22 flat round dishes, 6 square dishes, 6 spoons and various other pieces.”<sup>61</sup>. Traprain is a recent name, and the first element is from *tref*, “dwelling, farm, estate”; until the 18th century it was Duppelder, perhaps related to Welsh *din* “fort” and *pelydr* “spear shafts.”<sup>62</sup>

### *Dumfries and Galloway*

In the 2nd century the Greco-Egyptian writer Ptolemy wrote his *Geography*, a compilation of geographical coordinates of all parts of the world known to the Roman Empire during this time. In his section on Scotland, Ptolemy names several tribes and their strongholds. In the far southwest were the *Novantae* (“Fresh, Lively, Vigorous”) (see Welsh *newydd*)<sup>63</sup>, with their main stronghold at *Rerigionium* (“Very Royal Place”), thought to be somewhere near Loch Ryan in Galloway<sup>64</sup>; and next to them in Dumfriesshire were the *Selgovae* (“Hunters”), related to Old Irish *selg* “hunting”<sup>65</sup>.

### *The Picts*

The Picts lived in eastern Scotland north of the Firth and Forth, and although they remained outside the Empire, the Romans were certainly aware of them. The Latin term *Picti* (‘Picts’) was first used in 297 in a panegyric by Eumenius delivered before the Emperor Constantine, and probably referred to people living north of the Antonine Wall. The name *Picti* means ‘The Painted Ones’, and is generally thought to have been used because the Picts ‘painted’ or tattooed themselves in some way. But it may be connected with the Pictish place-name element *pit-* – according to the Scottish Place-Name Society<sup>66</sup>.

The basic sense is ‘a piece, a portion’, in place-names, of land. The P-Celtic word was adopted into Gaulish Vulgar Latin as *petia*, *pecia*, ‘a portion of land’, which > Fr *pièce* adopted as M-Modern English ‘piece’; in 12th century Anglo-Latin, it was *peta* ‘an allotment of turbary’, which entered Middle English as *pete* > Modern English ‘peat’. Adopted, probably from Middle Welsh into Middle Irish, it was *pit* ‘a ration, an allocation of food or drink’, perhaps influenced by the unrelated Vulgar Latin *\*pietantia*, ‘a pittance’, in monastic diet, ‘a light breakfast’.

P-Celtic means Welsh and Cornish, as distinct from Irish and Gaelic, which are referred to as Q-Celtic; turbary is the right to cut turf or peat.



## THE PEOPLE OF ROMAN BRITAIN

It is generally thought that the people encountered by the Romans when they invaded Britain were Celts, but the situation is slightly more complex than that. The Dumnonii of Devon and Cornwall were certainly Celtic, as were the Brigantes of Yorkshire. The Votadini, Novantae and Selgovae of southern Scotland were Celtic, the Picts probably spoke a Celtic language, and a Celtic language was probably spoken throughout the rest of Scotland. The people of Wales presumably spoke an early form of Welsh, and a Celtic language seems to have been spoken along the west coast of England. If the Belgae spoke a Celtic language, then Celtic also predominated in southeast England. But there are some anomalies: judging from the three Venta towns (Winchester in Hampshire, Caistor St Edmunds in Norfolk and Caerwent in Monmouthshire), and Sorviodunum/Salisbury in Wiltshire, a pre-Celtic language may have survived in parts of Britain; and some tribal names such as the Iceni of Norfolk may not be Celtic, while others such as the Durotriges defy interpretation.

## CHAPTER 3

### *Roman Britain (2): Burial Rites, Temples, and Curse Tablets*

#### DECAPITATED BURIALS IN ROMAN BRITAIN

##### *What is Decapitated Burial?*

During the Roman period, burial was strictly controlled by the state, so that everyone was either cremated or buried. Early Roman cemeteries in Britain tend to be cremation cemeteries, and it was only from the later 2nd century that cremation was gradually replaced by inhumation as the preferred rite<sup>1</sup>.

However, the inhabitants of Roman Britain practised a form of burial which was certainly not in line with Roman customs, the so-called 'decapitated burial'; this is most commonly found in the 4th century, when the power of the Roman Empire was declining, and Christianity had not yet become established. In decapitated burials, the head is detached, presumably after death and before interment. Usually, says Dorothy Watts<sup>2</sup>,

the head has been removed with care, with a sharp blade and with little damage, if any, to the bone. The cut is high, often between the second and third or third and fourth vertebrae. The body is then interred, with or without the head. If the head is present, as it usually is, it may be placed between the knees, the feet, the upper legs, outside the knees or feet, or on the pelvis. In a couple of published cases the head has been found outside the coffin or in the fill above it. Only rarely is it placed in its correct anatomical position.

##### *Little Keep, Dorchester (Dorset)*

Cemeteries with decapitated burials are found throughout Roman Britain,

especially in southern England. In 2007 Wessex Archaeology excavated a Roman cemetery at Little Keep, Dorchester (the Roman town of Durnovaria), 80 metres from the Roman cemetery at Poundbury, and 280 metres west of the Roman town walls. A total of 29 graves of late Romano-British date were excavated together with the remains of five truncated graves and a disturbed grave. There was clear archaeological evidence for the decapitation of five individuals, that is 17% of the burials; all were adults over 35 years of age, three were over 50, two were females and three were males. In each case, the skull and neck vertebrae above the point of severance had been placed at the distal end of the grave adjacent to or over the leg/ankle, though space for the head in the correct anatomical position was maintained within the grave<sup>3</sup>. Later McKinley<sup>4</sup> says that the “occurrence of so large a number of decapitations in one cemetery is rendered even more intriguing at Little Keep in that the practice is seen as a predominantly rural one, rarely seen and certainly far less common in large urban centres such as Roman Dorchester.”

#### *Lankhills, Winchester (Hampshire)*

Another town where decapitated burials are found is Winchester (Roman Venta Belgarum) in Hampshire, at the Lankhills cemetery, just to the north of the Roman town, which dates mainly to the 4th century. In seven graves the head had been severed from the body and the skull, mandible, and uppermost vertebrae were discovered still articulated lying by the legs or feet<sup>5</sup>. Of the seven decapitated skeletons, three belonged to men, two to women, and one to a child<sup>6</sup>. The heads seem to have been severed from the front, between the third and fourth vertebrae, probably with a knife. Bone damage was minimal, suggesting a degree of precision perhaps possible only if the deceased was already dead when decapitated<sup>7</sup>.

#### *Winterbourne Down, Pitton (Wiltshire)*

One rural example of decapitated burials is the cemetery at Winterbourne Down, Pitton, to the east of the Roman town of Sorviodunum near

Salisbury in Wiltshire. This was a 4th century Romano-British cemetery that contained 36 cremations and 14 inhumations. Of the 14 inhumations, three contained infant skeletons and one of these was accompanied by a pot containing an iron pin. Of the adults, five had been buried in coffins; two with coins, one of Constantine II (337-340), the other of Valentinian I (364-375). There were cleats and hobnails in five of the graves. Three adults had been beheaded<sup>8</sup>.

### *Wayside Farm, Devizes (Wiltshire)*

In 1999 a small Romano-British cemetery and midden (the name that archaeologists give to an accumulation of domestic and animal waste) was excavated at Wayside Farm on the southeastern outskirts of Devizes. There were three closely spaced graves, all aligned approximately east-west. According to the archaeologists John Valentin and Stephen Robinson<sup>9</sup>, two of the individuals in the graves had been buried in coffins; two had been buried with hobnail boots; and complete pottery vessels were found in two graves. In one grave, the head was removed and placed toward the foot end of the grave, with a complete pottery vessel next to it.

The midden was on a broadly north-south alignment, covering an area of 1050 square metres, with a depth varying between 0.3 metres towards the centre and 0.1 metres at its fringes. It is likely that the midden was formed as a result of a single episode of dumping. Most of the artefacts in the midden are Late Romano-British in date, including all of the coins but one. The heart of the midden was Pit F4225 which contained large quantities of pottery and animal bone (including complete ox skulls), and human bone fragments, including a femur (thigh bone) or humerus (upper arm bone) and a tibia (shinbone)<sup>10</sup>. The most important part of the Wayside Farm pottery assemblage is Late Roman Oxfordshire colour coated fine ware, which dates from after 350 AD<sup>11</sup>. The late Roman pottery assemblage is an important group for the region. The high proportion of finewares from the Oxford region demonstrates that accumulation and deposition must have occurred after 350/360 AD. Indeed, the number of distinctive late decorated

hemispherical bowls with rosette and demi-rosette decoration may indicate a post 370 AD date<sup>12</sup>. Sixteen coins from the midden are of 4th century date, but six Valentinianic issues of 364-378 AD and a moderately worn issue of Arcadius minted 392-402 AD suggest that the midden may have been formed in the late 4th or early 5th century. 3230 fragments of animal bone were found on the site – 83% cattle, 8% sheep/goat, 7% pig. Cattle remains are dominated by mandibles, loose teeth and numerous fragments from the skull<sup>13</sup>.

Valentin and Robinson conclude<sup>14</sup> that the midden artefacts appear to constitute votive offerings. The high proportion of pottery fine wares and animal bone butchery waste, including skulls, may be indicator of non-domestic (ritual) activity. A bronze garment collar found on the site (in Pit F4225) may have belonged to a priest<sup>15</sup> and was deliberately crumpled before being buried. They imply that the midden may be a successor to the nearby Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age sites of Potterne and All Cannings Cross.

### *Towcester (Northamptonshire)*

Excavations at the Roman town of Towcester in Northamptonshire (Roman Lactodurum) revealed the remains of two decapitated young adult males dating from the 2nd to 4th centuries. In one case, the skull had been placed over the lower legs, while in the other the skull was in its correct anatomical position<sup>16</sup>.

### *Cambridge (Cambridgeshire)*

Between August and September 2006 a Roman cemetery found during the course of an archaeological evaluation at the Babraham Institute to the south of Cambridge, was partially excavated. This revealed a narrow strip parallel to the putative Roman Road with 36 late 2nd to early 4th century AD graves containing upwards of 42 individuals (the latter equally divided between male and female) with evidence for the presence of family groups and at least ten infants and juveniles. Four or five of the skeletons “showed

evidence for post-mortem decapitation, whilst the average age of death was probably around 40. Accompanying grave goods (pottery beakers, jars, hob-nailed footwear (male) and bracelets, rings and necklaces (female) would seem to suggest that this was a moderately wealthy population, but without evidence for any rich burials. The cemetery appears to have been sited on a earlier circular cremation cemetery, possibly a Roman cremation barrow, containing up to seven cremations ranging from the late 1st to early 3rd century AD”<sup>17</sup>.

### *York*

In August 2004, beneath the former gardens of an 18th century mansion on Driffeld Terrace, in the city of York, the York Archaeological Trust revealed part of a large, highly unusual Roman period cemetery population consisting of eighty individuals, forty-eight (60 percent) of whom had been decapitated from behind with a very fine, sharp blade; the heads were placed in the graves with the rest of the body but not in anatomical position<sup>18</sup>.

Investigators recognized very early that this was an extremely unusual, if not unique, finding because of the very high proportion of decapitated adult males, a practice that had been encountered previously only sporadically in contemporary cemeteries. The cemetery is located southwest of the city walls, near the main Leeds-to-York road at the Mount, which is the highest point in the area and on the edge of the largest glacial moraine in Britain.

The cemetery dates to the late 2nd/early 3rd century, and given its prominent location was probably a high-status cemetery. So the burials at Driffeld Terrace are unlikely to be those of common criminals; a far more likely explanation is that they were men of higher status whose mode and manner of death merited burial in a location befitting their status.

The men were mostly adults under 45, slightly taller than average for Roman Britain, and “displayed a high occurrence of trauma, potentially

related to interpersonal violence and evidenced childhood stress and infection. This demographic profile resembles the population structure in a recently excavated burial ground of the 2nd and 3rd century AD at Ephesus in Asia Minor (Turkey), which has been interpreted to be a burial ground for gladiators. However, the evidence could also fit with a military context; the Roman army had a minimum height for recruitment and fallen soldiers would match the young adult profile of the cemetery”<sup>19</sup>.

### *Musselburgh Roman Fort (East Lothian)*

Between AD 142 and AD 162, the frontier of Roman Britain moved to southern Scotland with the building of the Antonine Wall between the Firth of Forth and the Firth of Clyde. One of the forts on the Antonine wall was Musselburgh Roman fort at Inveresk, 6 miles east of Edinburgh. Recently, “excavations by CFA Archaeology to the north of the fort found a small, scattered cemetery of cremations and inhumations, as well as a horse burial. Four of the six bodies discovered were decapitated after death, perhaps to ensure that the dead person’s ghost did not return to haunt the living. Such burial rites were widely practised in Roman Britain, but it is rare to encounter such a high percentage of decapitations. It is also unusually early – decapitations are typically a Late Roman phenomenon”<sup>20</sup>. Beneath the Roman cemetery was an Iron Age cemetery. Four burial pits were identified as Iron Age in date, one of which was a stone-lined cist. The pits contained a minimum of six individuals, as two of the graves contained double inhumations<sup>21</sup>.

### *The Meaning of Decapitated Burials*

There is no agreement on what the decapitated burials meant, but Belinda Crerar, a curator at the British Museum who specialises in Romano-British archaeology, links them to the Iron Age practice of excarnation. In her PhD thesis, she has studied decapitated burials in three areas: Dorchester in Dorset, London (the Roman town of Londinium), and the Fen Edge in Cambridgeshire. In the case of Dorchester, Crerar can find little evidence

for disarticulated bones in Roman cemeteries, but points out that disarticulated bones have been found in Iron Age sites in Dorset, like the settlement at Gussage All Saints, and the hillfort of Maiden Castle near Dorchester. In London, disarticulated bone, along with decapitated burials, has been found in cemeteries in Southwark such as Lant Street and Trinity Street. In addition, 48 human crania are recorded to have been dredged from the Walbrook and its tributaries, some of which are of Late Iron Age or Roman date<sup>22</sup>.

On the Fen Edge in Cambridgeshire, three cemeteries were studied – Babraham, Jesus Lane (Cambridge) and Foxton, which all contained decapitated burials. The cemetery at Foxton, some 6 miles south of Cambridge, contained two decapitated burials, but to appreciate the significance of these two burials, says Crerar<sup>23</sup>, “we must look beyond the limits of the cemetery itself. The inhumations within the bounded cemetery were not the only human remains to be discovered at Foxton. Two “partial” human skeletons were discovered to the north of the site. One was a badly disturbed inhumation of a young adult female and nearby, in ditch [3091], the partial remains of an unsexed subadult/young adult were found. Furthermore, a nearby pit [3285] contained an articulated human arm.” Overall, Goode and Bardill “record a total of 14 contexts from outside the cemetery area that contained human bone, mainly skull fragments, including individuals of all age groups and both sexes. We may add to this total the disarticulated and particularly-articulated human remains discovered within the backfill of the grave of headless female [3468], consisting of two adult male crania and an articulated left leg, as well as various other disarticulated adult and subadult bones.”

Later Crerar notes<sup>24</sup> that “Foxton has produced the most evidence of other forms of corpse manipulation with possible evidence for exposure and excarnation.” Excarnation of course was practised at the Iron Age site of Godwin Ridge near Earith in the Cambridgeshire Fens, well to the north of Foxton.



At the Roman cemetery of Guilden Morden, to the southwest of Cambridge, the archaeologist T.C. Lethbridge found the charred remains of a decapitated probable male. The individual's arms and lower legs also appear to have been removed and his skeleton was discovered lying in thick layers of charcoal. A nearby burial contained a disabled woman whose head had been severed as a consequence of a sideways cut and placed at her feet. Another woman from the cemetery had her head removed and placed in her lap. Lethbridge commented<sup>25</sup>:

I suggest, though this may appear fanciful, that this lame woman had been decapitated after her death to ensure that her spirit – perhaps bad-tempered owing to her infirmity – should not walk and haunt her relatives. The method of laying a ghost by decapitating a corpse was of course well known in later times ... one wonders if both of these women had been witches.

## TEMPLES AND CURSE TABLETS

### *Nettleton Shrub (Wiltshire)*

Nettleton lies to the northwest of Chippenham, not far from the border with Somerset. The Roman settlement at Nettleton lay mostly to the west of the Fosse Way (the Roman road from Bath to Cirencester) in grass-land on the south side of a valley. The temple, dedicated to Apollo Cunomaglus the “Apollo the Hound Lord”, lay on the valley side above a small stream. Items of military metalwork have been found in the area, and an enclosure with ditch-infill containing Claudian pottery may be a Roman fort or marching camp, though its trapezoidal outline makes this interpretation doubtful<sup>26</sup>.

The temple was built soon after 69 AD and consisted of a simple circular shrine. In around 230 the shrine was surrounded by an octagonal podium and precinct wall with a gatehouse, but around 250 the whole structure was burnt. It was replaced with an octagonal temple incorporating the remains

of the podium and consisting of an inner chamber surrounded by eight chambers and enclosed by a covered walkway<sup>27</sup>. Cunomaglus was equated with Apollo, but he almost certainly recalls the role played by dogs in excarnation, as practised widely in large parts of Britain.

### *Brean Down (Somerset)*

The temple at Brean Down lies at the eastern, landward, end of a mile long promontory projecting westwards into the Bristol Channel, to the south of Weston-super-Mare. The high land of the Down would have been an island in the Roman period, as it had been earlier in prehistory, surrounded by brackish saltmarsh. In Roman times, temples were often associated with curse tablets – thin sheets of lead with messages scratched on them asking a god or gods to punish someone who has wronged the writer of the curse. One curse tablet is known from Brean Down. The poorly preserved text of the tablet, found on the beach below the temple site, gives the only clue to the identity of the temple deity. The name is not preserved but the address of the god as *domina*, ‘Lady’ suggests that the deity was female. The text of the tablet is fragmentary, and reads<sup>28</sup>:

give to you] the *caricula* which [I have lost. Whether] slave or free,  
whether man or [woman] who . . . Lady, (?) . . . you are to make  
redeem(?) them thus with his own blood . . . whether man or woman  
give to you] the *caricula* which [I have lost. Whether] slave or free,  
whether man or [woman] who . . . Lady, (?) . . . you are to make  
redeem(?) them thus with his own blood . . . whether man or woman

The meaning of *caricula* is unknown, so has not been translated.

The name Brean is Celtic, related to Welsh *bryn* “hill”. This is not the only Celtic name in Somerset: Creech St Michael to the east of Taunton is related to Welsh *crug* “hillock”; Crewkerne to the southwest of Yeovil is also related to *crug*; Yeovil itself is derived from the Celtic river-name *gifl*, “forked river”, an earlier name for the River Yeo<sup>29</sup>; Ilchester is also derived from *gifl* plus *cester* “fort”.

### *Pagans Hill Roman Temple (Somerset)*

Pagans Hill Roman temple at Chew Stoke, 8 miles south of Bristol and to the west of Bath, occupies the eastern end of a spur that overlooks the Chew Valley. Although not particularly high, the situation of the temple gives a wide view to north, east and potentially also to the south although this is currently obscured by a yew hedge. Likewise the temple complex would have been a prominent feature in the local landscape. The curse tablets found at the temple do not identify the deity. An alternative clue comes from four sculptural fragments, parts of the torso of a seated dog with a jewelled collar perhaps originally 0.8m in height. Believed at the time of excavation to date to the 15th or 16th centuries, re-evaluation suggests a Roman date. Dogs are sometimes associated with the god Apollo in healing cults across the Roman world, being perhaps suitable spirit guides to those in the grip of a healing trance; dogs were also associated with excarnation in the Iron Age. One of the curse tablets is fragmentary and reads<sup>30</sup>:

. . . in 3 thousand denarii, of which (I give) you half part on condition that you exact it from Vassicillus the son of [. . .] cominus and from his wife, since the coin(?) which they have stolen(?) from my house (the syntax breaks down) and you are not to permit them health nor to drink nor to eat nor to sleep [nor] to have healthy [children] unless they bring this [my] property to your temple. With repeated [prayers] I ask you that this [coin(?)] may come to be recovered [from the very] names of my [enemies]

### *The Temple of Sulis Minerva, Bath (Somerset)*

Perhaps the most famous religious site in Roman Britain was the temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath in Somerset (Roman *Aquae Sulis*). This temple was dedicated to the Roman goddess Minerva and the Celtic Goddess Sulis. Sulis is probably derived from the Indo-European root *suel* “sun” (related to English *solar*). The Celtic scholar Ranko Matasovic notes that in Old Irish the word derived from *suel* is *suil*, meaning “eye”, and that the goddess

Sulis “seems to have been venerated near hot springs and wells. The connection between the concepts of ‘sun’, ‘the eye’ and “the spring’ also belongs to the realm of mythology” – the sun is the “eye of the sky” and a well is the “eye of the earth”<sup>31</sup>. Sulis has the reputation of a healer-goddess, but the only real evidence for this is her association with a thermal spring. However, 130 lead and pewter curses (called in Latin *defixiones*) have been found in the reservoir at Bath which paint a different picture<sup>32</sup>:

Sulis was clearly perceived as an avenger of wrongs. Water and curses have a well-established link; as late as the nineteenth century in Wales, a man was imprisoned for inscribing a curse on a lead sheet and throwing it into a well. In a sense the named or unnamed malefactor was being symbolically sacrificed to the goddess. The ‘fixing’ was an important element of the *defixio*, so that the curse would not rebound on the curser [...] The curses are very harsh, associated with fertility, sleep, blood and internal disorders

Here are some of the curses from Bath<sup>33</sup>:

Whether pagan or Christian, whether man or woman, whether boy or girl, whether slave or free whoever has stolen from me, Annianus [son of] Matutina (?), six silver coins from my purse, you, Lady Goddess, are to exact [them] from him. If through some deceit he has given me... and do not give thus to him but reckon as (?) the blood of him who has invoked his upon me.

Docimedis has lost two gloves and asks that the thief responsible should lose their minds [sic] and eyes in the goddess’ temple.

May he who carried off Vilbia from me become liquid as the water. May she who so obscenely devoured her become dumb. So long as someone, whether slave or free, keeps silent or knows anything about it, he may be accursed in (his) blood, and eyes and every limb and even have all (his) intestines quite eaten away if he has stolen the ring or been privy (to the theft).

### *Temple of Nodens, Lydney Park (Gloucestershire)*

The temple at Lydney Park in Gloucestershire, on the west bank of the Severn close to the Welsh border, was dedicated to the Nodens, a British god. Lydney Camp is a Late Iron Age promontory fort established in or just before the 1st century BC. In the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD the Romano-British population there were engaged in iron-mining, and in the late 3rd or early 4th century the hillfort became the site of a Romano-British temple. The presiding deity at Lydney “is named as Nodens on the single curse tablet from the site and on two other metal plaques from the site as Mars Nodons and Nudens Mars”. Among the votive objects (ritual deposits) found at the site are dog figurines – some are “highly schematic”, but one one figurine, possibly of an Irish wolfhound, is “amongst the most accomplished pieces of bronze sculpture from Roman Britain.” Other ritual offerings include “the bone representation of a woman and a hollow bronze arm.” The “discovery of an oculist’s stamp (to be stamped into cakes of eye medicine)” suggests the presence of a healer at the temple<sup>34</sup>. Sea-monsters and fish on the cella mosaic, and bronze reliefs depicting a sea deity, fishermen and tritons suggest some connexion of Nodens with the sea. A bronze object (headdress or vessel?) also shows a sea-god driving a chariot between torch-bearing putti (chubby male children) and tritons<sup>35</sup>.

Nodens appears in Irish mythology as Nuada, a legendary Irish king who lost a hand or arm in a battle, and had it replaced by a silver hand or arm. In Welsh mythology Nodens became Nudd or Lludd, and in the 11th century tale *Culhwch and Olwen* it is said of Gwyn son of Nudd that “God has placed [him] over the brood of devils in Annwn, lest they should destroy the present race”<sup>36</sup>.

One curse tablet is known from Lydney Park:

To the god Nodens: Silvianus has lost his ring and given half (its value) to Nodens. Among those who are called Senicianus do not allow health until he brings it to the temple of Nodens.’

‘(This curse) comes into force again.’

### *The Temple of Mercury, Uley (Gloucestershire)*

The temple of Mercury at Uley in Gloucestershire was excavated between 1976 and 1979 (Mercury was the Roman messenger of the gods, said by Julius Caesar to be popular among the Gauls). The temple stood on West Hill, overlooking the Severn valley to the west, not far from the Iron Age hillfort of Uleybury, and the Neolithic long barrow known as Hetty Pegler's Tump. "The earliest phase of the temple is represented by standing stones forming the focus of an open-ended oval enclosure thought to be of Neolithic date. The Iron Age saw the construction of ditched and palisaded enclosures which contained shrines of timber construction and pits. During the second century a central timber shrine was replaced by one of Romano-British date which was extended in the mid 4th century. Around the temple were groups of buildings thought to be living quarters and guest accommodation"<sup>37</sup>.

The votive deposits associated with the pre-Roman sanctuary "give some clue to the character of the pre-Roman deity. The presence of weapons suggests a martial aspect". In the Roman period the identity of this local god "seems to have been assimilated with the Roman deity Mercury. Mercury is named on curses, stone altars and metal plaques and represented in statues and figurines. The major cult statue probably stood within the cella" (the room at the centre of the temple). Abundant evidence "was recovered of offerings made to the god at Uley, both specifically votive objects and everyday items. The evidence for Iron Age and early Roman worship on the site largely derives from the deposits sampled from the pits and ditches beneath the second century AD stone temple", which included "full size weapons and tools, coins, near complete vessels, brooches, fragments of human bone and partially articulated animal remains"<sup>38</sup>.

By the late Roman period the repertoire of items dedicated to the gods also include specifically votive items that drew on classical religious tradition. Among these were curse tablets, altars and plaques inscribed with dedications to the god and votive "leaves" in very thin sheet bronze.

Study of the animal bones has revealed patterns in sacrifice. Sheep and goat accounted for 90% of the animal bones and chicken bones for an unusually high percentage of the remainder. This must reflect the adoption of classical patterns of sacrifice to Mercury, both being animals associated with the god. Analysis of the age of the sheep and goats killed suggests that sacrifice peaked in August/ September, perhaps in relation to a seasonal festival held at the temple.

Some 200 curse tablets were found at Uley, including nearly 50 curse tablets found in deposits dating from around 350-380 AD. They may originally have been deposited in a water-filled tank or pool in the centre of the temple. Among these curse tablets the most graphic was one offered by a certain Biccus (a Celtic name)<sup>39</sup>:

Biccus gives Mercury whatever he has lost (that the thief), whether man or male (sic), may not urinate nor defecate nor speak nor sleep nor stay awake nor [have] well-being or health, unless he bring (it) in the temple of Mercury; nor gain consciousness (sic) of (it) unless with my intervention

### *Caerleon, South Wales*

Caerleon was a Roman legionary fort near Newport in south Wales, and the single curse tablet known from Caerleon was found during excavations of the amphitheatre by Sir Mortimer Wheeler in 1926 and 1927. The amphitheatre was built in AD 80, south-west of the legionary fortress. The Second Legion Augusta garrisoned the fortress from the late first to the fourth centuries AD, inscriptions demonstrating the soldiers also to be the builders of the amphitheatre.

The curse tablet was found in the sand of the arena. It is addressed to the goddess Nemesis, to whom a chamber built over one of the minor entrances to the arena may have served as a shrine. In the rear wall of the chamber was a brick built niche, perhaps housing a statue of the deity. Nemesis, a goddess of retribution, is frequently attested in Roman amphitheatres:

dedications to the goddess have survived at Chester, for example. The curse tablet reads: “Lady Nemesis, I give thee a cloak and a pair of boots, let him who wore them not redeem them except with his life and blood.”<sup>40</sup>.

### *Haddenham (Cambridgeshire)*

There was a Romano-British shrine at Haddenham in the Cambridgeshire Fens, to the southwest of Ely and not far from Godwin Ridge, which was placed on top of a Bronze Age barrow. The barrow had been deturfed in the mid 2nd century, and a masonry-footed octagonal cell constructed on its southern edge, placed directly over a cluster of secondary cremations in the barrow ditch. In the floor of the octagon were many sheep mandibles with hooves laid out on either side, and in two cases a coin had been placed in the mandibles. In the northwest corner of the compound a series of intercutting pits contained four complete sheep skeletons, each accompanied by a pot. A boar burial was found in the southeast of the compound<sup>41</sup>.

### *Brigstock (Northamptonshire)*

Brigstock lies to the southeast of Corby in Northamptonshire, and is the site of a Roman temple. A Roman bronze statuette of a horse and rider, also an unidentified bronze object, were picked up about a mile east of Brigstock. A good deal of pottery, mostly 2nd century, and another similar statuette is said to have been found at the same place, which may be the site of a temple. Two Roman temples were built in the 3rd century at Brigstock and continued in use until the late 4th century. The northern temple was 37.5 feet in diameter with walls 2.5 feet thick, and 20 feet to the south was a 12 sided temple varying in diameter from 29.5 feet to 32 feet and built over and inside an Iron Age ditch. The finds included 278 coins of the 1st to 4th centuries, including a Corieltauvian stater of 25 AD, 3rd and 4th century sherds, and models including three pairs of bronze model horses and riders<sup>42</sup>. The bronze horses and riders are presumably identical to the rider god found widely in Lincolnshire.



### *Ancaster (Lincolnshire)*

Ancaster is in the south of Lincolnshire, on the site of a Roman town, and an important sculpture from Ancaster Roman town was discovered in 1831 while a grave was being dug in the south-eastern corner of the churchyard of the parish church of St. Martin<sup>43</sup>.

The sculpture which is 1 foot 7 inches long and 1 foot 4 inches high, shows three seated goddesses and represents the Romano-Celtic Mother-Goddess in triple form. When it was found the sculpture was still standing upright, facing south and had been placed on top of a rough stone block at one end of a massive 6 feet by 4 feet stone slab. At the southern end of the slab was a small, elaborately carved stone altar 1 foot high and 5 inches wide, which had been set on a stone disc 9 inches in diameter placed on top of a stone column 1 foot 8 inches high. The column itself stood on a stone block 5 inches by 15 inches by 15 inches.

The three goddesses are seen here seated on a long couch with upright sides and back.

The goddess on the right hand side is holding a round loaf of bread or possibly a corn measure in her right hand while the central figure holds a shallow basket of fruit, probably apples. The figure on the left holds a flat dish or tray, on which is an animal, perhaps a piglet or a lamb, in her left hand and a small 'patera' or bowl in her right hand.

As I said, a rider god was popular in Lincolnshire. A number of images of rider gods are known from Lincolnshire, in the form of copper alloy statuettes of warriors on horseback, enamelled copper alloy brooches and a stone carving. The depictions are all military in nature and a connection with the Roman war god Mars is commonly cited. No epigraphic evidence of this connection has been identified, however, and the native style of all of the depictions suggests that the deity was British in origin, even if a conflation with Mars was subsequently perceived. An alternative theory is

that rather than a war god, a connection with hunting could have been envisaged. The artefacts are all believed to date to the 3rd and 4th centuries, making the cult one that became prevalent in the latter half of the Roman period. There are three main centres of distribution. The first is a focus of activity around Sleaford, particularly of horse and rider brooches. The second is an association between bronze statuettes and the River Trent (for example, near Littleborough in Nottinghamshire), and the third a smaller and looser distribution of brooches on the Lincolnshire Wolds (for example, at Horncastle)<sup>44</sup>.

### *Buxton (Derbyshire)*

In the Roman period Buxton in Derbyshire was known as *Aquae Arnemetiae* (“Waters of Arnemetia”), named after the goddess Arnemetia (“She Who Dwells in the Sacred Grove”)<sup>45</sup>.

In the 18th century lead-lined baths, red plaster and Roman building remains were recorded in the St Anne’s Well area of Buxton. The evidence is now largely covered by the Crescent Hotel and baths. In 1975 during reconstruction work, a brick structure and a votive deposit of 232 Roman coins, three bronze bracelets and a wire clasp ranging in the date from the 1st to the 4th century AD were revealed. The finds are thought to indicate native offerings to Arnemetia throughout the Roman period<sup>46</sup>.

### *Piercebridge (County Durham)*

Piercebridge on the River Tees near Darlington lies on Dere Street, the Roman road from York to the Antonine Wall in Scotland. “The earliest Roman occupation at Piercebridge came in the form of a villa, where continuity from the Iron Age into the 2nd century AD could be demonstrated. The settlement north of the river had started to develop by the end of the 1st century AD, but there is no evidence of any military involvement prior to the mid 2nd century AD. It is suggested that settlement may therefore have developed as a result of the river crossing; finds from the river suggest possible religious votive activity at this time. A major

change in the nature of occupation can be seen in the late 2nd century AD when the site became the focus of major military activity, reflected in the material culture. High quality masonry structures were built just to the west of Tofts Field, to the north of the river.

Nevertheless, the extant fort defences were not built till the mid 3rd century AD.”<sup>47</sup>

Since the mid 1980s, divers Bob Middlemass and Rolfe Mitchinson have recovered hundreds of objects from a relatively small area on the bed of the River Tees. The objects range in date from the Late Iron Age to the medieval period and were recovered through a combination of underwater metal detecting and ‘eyes only’ retrieval.

A total of 586 coins have already been discovered. Dating of these show some interesting deviation from the coin assemblage recovered from the earlier excavations, suggesting a different pattern of coin loss and therefore, by inference, function. The structure of the assemblage as a whole is more in keeping with votive offerings rather than everyday loss and discard ... The river assemblage shows two peaks in distribution, the first around 138-161AD and the second around 193-222 AD.

### *Carrawburgh Roman Fort (Northumberland)*

Carrawburgh Roman Fort on Hadrian’s Wall in the parish of Simonsburn (Northumberland) was probably constructed around AD 130 and remained in use until the 4th century. The most significant part of the fort is Coventina’s Well (actually a spring or reservoir) which was excavated in 1876. The excavation revealed a spring encased in a rectangular basin, about 8 feet 6 inches by 7 feet 10 inches, which lay at the centre of a walled enclosure or temple, measuring 40 feet north/south by 38 feet transversely within a wall 2 feet 11 inches thick. The contents of the well included at least 13,487 coins, from Mark Antony to Gratian, a relief of three water nymphs, the head of a male statue, two dedication slabs to the goddess

Coventina, ten altars to Coventina and Minerva, two clay incense burners, and a wide range of votive objects<sup>48</sup>. Also found in the well were jewellery, bones, and many other objects. On one incense burner she is referred to as “Augusta”, the only non-Roman goddess in Britain to receive this designation<sup>49</sup>.

## CURSE TABLETS IN EASTERN BRITAIN

It is no doubt significant that curse tablets tend to be found in western Britain, in areas like Somerset where Celts seemed to dominate, or in Gloucestershire, which is close to Wales. But that doesn't mean that curse tablets are absent from eastern England. For example, a curse tablet was found in the mudflats of the River Hamble, to the east of Southampton, in what was probably the territory of the Belgae. The nearest known Roman settlement to the Hamble is the small walled town of Bitterne, approximately 5 miles to the northwest. The tablet is dedicated to Neptune, the Roman god of freshwater and the sea, and reads<sup>50</sup>:

Lord Neptune, I give you the man who has stolen the solidus and six argentioli of Muconius. So I give the names who took them away, whether male or female, whether boy or girl. So I give you, Niskus, and to Neptune the life, health, blood of him who has been privy to that taking-away. The mind which stole this and which has been privy to it, may you take it away. The thief who stole this, may you consume his blood and take it away, Lord Neptune.

Other curse tablets addressed to Neptune have been found in the River Thames at London, and in the River Tas at Caistor St Edmund in Norfolk (Roman Venta Icenorum)<sup>51</sup>. Neptune is also invoked in a folded lead tablet found in the Little Ouse at Brandon in Suffolk, near the border with Norfolk. This curses a thief who had stolen a pan, and sacrifices him to the god Neptune by hazel, a reference to drowning by holding under water with a hazel hurdle<sup>52</sup>. Both of these sites were in the territory of the Iceni.

A curse tablet was found in 1960 on the lower slope of Red Hill in the parish of Ratcliffe-on-Soar (Nottinghamshire), probably in the territory of the Corieltavi. Roman pottery, bone counters and other objects have been found on Red Hill, which appears to be a Roman site, at the junction of the rivers Trent and Soar. The curse tablet reads<sup>53</sup>:

In the name of Camulorix and Titocuna I have dedicated in the temple of the god the mule(?) which they have lost. Whoever stole that mule(?), whatever his name, may he let his blood until the day he die. Whoever stole the objects of theft, mayham die; and the ( ), whoever stole it, may he die also. Whoe(ver stole it and the ( ) from the house or the pair of bags(?), whoever stole it, may he die by the god

Camulorix and Titocuna are both Celtic names: Camulorix is made up of *kamulo*- “champion” and *rigo*- “king” , while the second element of Titocuna is *kuno*- “hound”<sup>54</sup>

## THE AFTERLIFE IN ROMAN BRITAIN

Most Roman Britons buried their dead in ways sanctioned by the state, but the decapitated burials suggest that the Iron Age practice of excarnation was not forgotten in 4th century Britain. Curse tablets developed in ancient Greece, and were often addressed to someone dead asking them to punish someone living who was guilty of a small crime like theft. Curse tablets were most common in Celtic areas of Britain like Somerset and Gloucestershire close to the border with Wales, and were addressed to gods, probably gods who had some connection with death (Mercury, for example, conducted the souls of the dead to Hades). Water was important in Iron Age ritual, and Neptune was sometimes addressed in curse tablets; native water gods or goddesses are also found in Bath (Somerset), Piercebridge (County Durham), and Carrawburgh Roman fort (Northumberland). One of the most intriguing Romano-British gods is the rider god, found in Northamptonshire and Lincolnshire, who has no name but was evidently a significant figure,

particularly in Lincolnshire.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Celtic Britain After the Romans (1) The Survival of Native Britons After the Departure of the Romans*

#### BRITAIN AFTER THE ROMANS: ANGLO-SAXONS AND CELTS

In the early 5th century AD the last Roman legions departed, and Anglo-Saxons from northern Germany and southern Denmark began settling in England. Initially they settled in the east of England, from Northumberland in the north to Hampshire in the south, with early cemeteries in North Yorkshire, East Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, the Isle of Wight, southern Hampshire, and southeast Wiltshire. Meanwhile life in western England, Wales, and much of Scotland continued as before, except that the new religion of Christianity replaced the earlier pagan religion.

#### SOUTHWEST ENGLAND

##### *The Kingdom of Dumnonia*

After the departure of the Romans, the Dumnonii established the kingdom of Dumnonia in Cornwall and Devon. The most important early site in Dumnonia was Tintagel Island (technically a peninsula), in northeast Cornwall, which may have had some administrative function in Roman times (two Roman milestones have been found nearby, one dated to between 251 and 253, the other dated to between 308 and 324). Large quantities of Mediterranean pottery and glass dating from the 5th and 6th centuries have been found there<sup>1</sup>, as well as a large and elaborate building, making it clear that this was a high-status site, presumably the centre of the kings of Dumnonia. Carved slates have been found there, one recording the

construction of something for or by “Artognou”, and there is strong evidence that the inhabitants of Tintagel were Christian<sup>2</sup>. Near the church of St. Materiana at Tintagel are the remains of an earthwork enclosure that were once included in part of the area now occupied by Tintagel Churchyard. Excavations in 1991 showed that the enclosure is an early Christian churchyard dating back to the 6th century. Many of the graves of the inhumation cemetery were cist graves<sup>3</sup>.

An excavation in 2016 at Tintagel by the Cornwall Archaeological Unit found more evidence that this was an elite site. The excavation uncovered “stone-walled structures on the southern terrace of Tintagel’s island area, with substantial stone walls and slate floors, accessed by a flight of slate steps. Significant finds include a section of a fine Phocaeen red slipware bowl from Turkey, imported amphorae thought to be from southern Turkey or Cyprus, and fine glassware from Spain. Cow, sheep and goat bones showing signs of butchering and cooking were unearthed, together with oyster shells and a cod bone”<sup>4</sup>. The excavators also discovered a 7th century slate window ledge inscribed with a mixture of Latin and Celtic. The ledge includes what is believed to be a Roman name, Tito, and a Celtic one, Budic. The Latin words *fili* (son or sons) and *viri duo* (two men) also appear<sup>5</sup>.

Christianity flourished in Cornwall at a number of sites. In the 5th or early 6th century a Celtic monastery Lann Docco was founded by St Docco at St Kew near Wadebridge in Cornwall, a few miles from Tintagel. It was visited by St Samson in the 6th century. The church was dedicated to St Docco until 1440 when it was rededicated to St Kew. An early Christian memorial stone of the 6th or 7th century, now preserved in the parish church of Saint Kew, was recovered in 1924 from the bed of the stream just below the church, where the bridge spans it. It bears the Latin inscription, ‘IUSTUS’, and the ogham inscription ‘ISTIS’<sup>6</sup> (ogham is an early medieval script mainly used to write the Irish language). St Kew was reputedly Docco’s sister, but when she visited her brother in his hermit’s cell, “he



would not receive her until such time as he saw a wild boar miraculously obey her, after which time he conversed with her, who proved of such rare virtue and holiness as she was after her death reputed a saint and the church of the parish called after her.”<sup>7</sup>.

Cornwall’s best known saint is Petroc, originally associated with Padstow on the north coast of Cornwall. According to tradition, the Celtic monastery of Lanwethinoc at Padstow was founded by Bishop Wethinoc, who was replaced by Petroc in the 6th century. No trace remains of the monastery, but a small cemetery dating to the 8th or 9th century was found nearby. Seventeen graves were exposed, arranged in two rows; they were all lined and capped with slate, and aligned broadly east–west<sup>8</sup>.

Later the cult of St. Petroc moved to Bodmin, to the southwest of Bodmin Moor.

The 11th and 12th century Lives of St Petroc attributed the origins of a settlement at Bodmin to the saint having gone into a “remote wilderness” inland from his earlier foundations at Padstow and Little Petherick and there taking over the dwelling of a hermit, St Uuron. However, it seems likely that a monastic settlement may actually have been established much later at Bodmin, around 800 AD: “it has been suggested that Bodmin was the site of a monastery or church named as Dinuurrin in a documentary source dated between AD 833 and AD 870”<sup>9</sup>.

Another well-known Cornish saint is Piran of Perranporth, on the north coast of Cornwall, 6 miles southwest of Newquay. St Piran’s Oratory at Perranporth is “an early Christian chapel consisting of a small stone-built nave and chancel located on the wind-blown Gear Sand 1.5km from the coast line at Perran Bay. Burials, some in stone and slate cists lie within an associated graveyard which surrounds the chapel ... The oratory chapel is thought to have been erected probably in the 7th century AD and remained in use perhaps until the 11th or 12th centuries ... At least ten cist burials, believed to be of early medieval date, and the bleached bones of further burials, were discovered in close proximity to the chapel and at distances up

to 30m from its foundations, during the works of 1980”<sup>10</sup>.

The kingdom of Dumnonia obviously included Devon – whose name is derived from Dumnonii – and one possible Dumnonian site in Devon is the hillfort of High Peak at Otterton in southeast Devon. The site “has been severely truncated by coastal erosion, and only a fragment of the presumed enclosure remains. The surviving earthworks comprise the outer western face of a rampart 70 metres long running north-east to south-west along the cliff edge ... A second, outer, rampart is set on a terrace at the eastern side of the enclosure. Excavations at the site in 1871 and 1929 produced Neolithic and Early Medieval material, although originally the latter was dated to the Iron Age and Roman periods, and the earthworks considered to represent a hillfort of that approximate date. Excavation in 1961 and 1964 confirmed the post-Roman date of the earthwork. Finds comprised amphora sherds of Mediterranean origin (but apparently no other pottery), plus animal bones, charcoal, a whetstone and a spindle whorl. Occupation seems to belong broadly within the 6th to 8th centuries AD”<sup>11</sup>.

In the Anglo-Saxon period Isca became Escanceaster (“Fortess on the Exe”), and later Exeter. It is possible that Exeter, which is not far from High Peak, became a Christian centre after the departure of the Romans. Excavations on the site of the demolished church of St Mary Major in Exeter found an early cemetery: “six unfurnished burials [were] cut into the remains of the Roman forum and basilica; two of the burials were radiocarbon dated to the 5th century and are thought to be part of a much larger cemetery destroyed by grave digging. Four of the graves were arranged in a row indicating they were part of a well laid out cemetery. All were orientated northwest to southeast, the same alignment as the demolished Roman buildings. It is possible that grave orientation was determined by extant features or structures outside the excavated area”<sup>12</sup>. By the 7th century, this cemetery had become the site of an Anglo-Saxon minster church and cemetery.

*Somerset*

Winsford is a village on Exmoor in Somerset, not far from the Devon border, and is the site of the Caratacus Stone, a 6th century inscribed stone bearing the words CARATACI NEPOS, “kinsman of Caratacus.” The stone (the only memorial stone found in Somerset) is presumably Christian, and is situated in open moorland 140m east of Spire Cross on the southeastern edge of Winsford Hill. It is generally accepted that the stone was erected as a memorial to someone claiming descent from Caratacus, who led resistance to the Roman invasion of Britain between 43 and 51 AD<sup>13</sup>. The presence of the inscribed stone suggests that west Somerset may have been part of Dumnonia.

Carhampton is a village near Exmoor in west Somerset, and excavations there in the 1990s “revealed an occupation site dating from the 5th to 8th century AD. Ditches, pathways and structural features such as post holes and mortar layers were revealed by excavation, though the trenches were too narrow to provide a plan of any of the structures. Metalworking hearths, and quantities of metal slag and charcoal were present.”<sup>14</sup>. Several sherds of eastern Mediterranean pottery were found, dating from the 5th or 6th centuries AD<sup>15</sup>. This pottery is usually associated with high-status sites like defended settlements or monasteries. A medieval cemetery was discovered and “18 burials recorded”, suggesting that the eastern Mediterranean pottery belonged to an early monastery. The number of burials in the cemetery “is estimated at several hundred, when account is taken of those found in the 19th century”<sup>16</sup>. Carhampton is associated with the Welsh saint Carantoc, and a church dedicated to the saint was recorded in Norman times<sup>17</sup>.

There was probably a British monastery or hermitage on Glastonbury Tor. Excavations in 1964-6 uncovered timber buildings, evidence of bronze-working, evidence of much meat-eating (food bones), and 14 sherds of imported Mediterranean pottery dating to the 6th century<sup>18</sup>. Given its isolated position, it is more likely to have been a hermitage – Aldhelm abbot of Malmesbury, writing in the late 7th century, refers to British

monasticism disparagingly as “a life of contemplative retirement away in some squalid wilderness”<sup>19</sup>, and Glastonbury Tor would certainly have qualified as a wilderness in the 6th century.

The main Roman town in the south of Somerset was Lindinis, now the village of Ilchester. It is likely that Lindinis did not continue much beyond 400 AD, and settlement then shifted to Cadbury Castle (South Cadbury), an Iron Age hillfort excavated by Leslie Alcock in the 1960s and early 1970s. Alcock showed that Cadbury Castle had been occupied in the late 5th and 6th centuries. A timber-laced rampart had been constructed around the whole perimeter of the inner bank of the hillfort<sup>20</sup>.

This post-Roman earthwork was pierced by at least one gate with a cobbled road running beneath a rectilinear wooden tower or gatehouse. Inside, few structures of this date were identifiable, although many undated post-holes were found. On a slightly raised area (“the summit”) there was a large post-built rectangular building (19 x 10m) with an internal wall-trench. This was near two parallel wall-trenches, indicating a far smaller structure.

These buildings and the rampart were associated with imported Mediterranean pottery ... Frankish pottery and imported Germanic glass, some similar to that from ‘Anglo-Saxon’ cemeteries. The pottery and glass show a notable concentration on the biggest structure, implying consumption of food and drink from high-quality tableware within the structure ... The only directly military artefact was a crossbow bolt, perhaps dating from the 5th or 6th century, attesting the use of this Roman type of weapon at the site.

The evidence suggests that South Cadbury “was an important political or military centre of the fifth and sixth centuries, with elite occupants able to enjoy imported luxuries”.

### *Dorset*

In 2004 Martin Papworth of the National Trust carried out a small

excavation of Badbury Rings hillfort. He found Iron Age occupation, but above it there was “an unexpected floor of rammed chalk, and scattered on its surface were scraps of occupation evidence. Fragments of worn late Roman pottery, a spiral bronze ring, a few nails, a worn 4th century coin and patches of charcoal, perhaps remains of cooking fires.” Samples of charcoal were sent away for radiocarbon dating, and all three dates came back as AD 480-520, indicating that the hillfort was occupied after the Romans departed<sup>21</sup>.

This was not the only defensive measure taken in Dorset. Bokerley Dyke is a linear earthwork some 4 miles long which runs for much of its length along the county boundary between Dorset and Hampshire in Cranborne Chase. Excavations of the dyke have not been extensive. “Between 1888 and 1891 General Pitt Rivers’ investigation of the settlement to the north of the Roman road at Bokerley Junction also encompassed the excavation of sections through the ditch ... More recent excavations were carried out at Bokerley Junction in 1942-3 and in 1958. The information from these excavations has confirmed that, in its present form, the earthwork is of Roman or slightly later date. However Bokerley Dyke is believed to have its origin in the Bronze Age or Early Iron Age”<sup>22</sup>.

Close to Bokerley Dyke is Pentridge, which has a Celtic name, related to Welsh *pen* “head” and *twrch* “wild boar”<sup>23</sup>. This is not the only Celtic place-name in Dorset: Crichel on Cranborne Chase (an area with a long history of settlement from the Neolithic to the Iron Age) is related to Welsh *crug* “hillock”<sup>24</sup>; Fontmell on the edge of Cranborne Chase contains the Celtic element – mell “bald hill” (see Welsh *moel*)<sup>25</sup>; Lytchett in the south of Dorset, not far from Wareham, is related to Welsh *llwyd*, “grey” and *coed* “forest, wood”<sup>26</sup>; and Chideock in southwest Dorset, near the border with Devon, is related to Welsh Celtic *coed* “forest, wood”<sup>27</sup>.

### *Wiltshire*

It is possible that Oldbury Castle hillfort in the parish of Calne, to the north of Devizes and not far from the Roman town of Verlucio, was refortified

after the last Roman legions departed. A penannular brooch of probable 5th century date is known from the hillfort, with another example from nearby Calne. Some half a mile away a Roman villa was found beneath the Cherhill village church<sup>28</sup>. The second element of Cherhill is Celtic *ial*, “fertile upland”<sup>29</sup>, all of which suggests that the area remained in British hands until at least the 5th century.

There are other possible Celtic survivals in northwest Wiltshire, including eleven occurrences of the minor name Idober, found, for example, in Idoure, the earlier name for Brinkworth Brook (a tributary of the Bristol Avon)<sup>30</sup>, in Idober House, Idober Demesne Farm and Home Idober Farm near Dauntsey – Idober contains the Welsh elements *uwch* “above” and *dwfr* “water”, and possibly means “stream”<sup>31</sup>; and Chittoe to the southwest of Cherhill, which can be interpreted as \*ced teyw “thick wood”<sup>32</sup>, represented today by Welsh *coed* “wood” and *tew* “thick.”<sup>33</sup>

## WALES

### *Monmouthshire (Southeast Wales)*

The Roman town of Venta Silurum became Caerwent (“fort of Gwent”) in the medieval period, part of the kingdom of Gwent (derived from Venta). Little is known about early medieval Caerwent and no structural evidence of buildings has been found from this period, “although there are burials surviving from this time in the area of the church suggesting that Caerwent was a major ecclesiastical centre in Gwent Iscoed [Gwent “below-the-wood”] in the 6th and 7th centuries. The post-Roman cemeteries (with 118 known burials) are far larger than the likely residual population and burials were probably brought here from the surrounding area. By the 10th century there was a monastery at Caerwent. The presence of a religious site was confirmed by the discovery of a pre-Norman disc cross head south-east of the present church.”<sup>34</sup>.

### *Glamorgan (South Wales)*

After the departure of the Romans there was a Dark Age settlement at Dinas Powys, southwest of Cardiff in the Vale of Glamorgan. Dinas Powys is a small promontory fort crowning the highest northern spur of an isolated hill, which was probably first settled in the Late Iron Age or even the Roman period. It was excavated between 1954 and 1958 by Leslie Alcock, who found much early medieval pottery dating from the 5th to 7th century, including “Phocaean slipwares from Asia Minor” (Phocaea, now Foça, is on the west coast of what is now Turkey) and “southern Mediterranean examples which were produced near Carthage”<sup>35</sup>. He also found a 7th century Kentish blue glass squat beaker similar to examples from princely Anglo-Saxon burials found at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk and Prittlewell in Essex<sup>36</sup>. Alcock also found evidence for industrial activity, such as bronze and iron metalwork and tools for jewellery making, together with twelve thousand animal bones (sheep cattle and pigs) which indicated that animals were entering the settlement at Dinas Powys and being butchered there<sup>37</sup>.

Just a short distance from Dinas Powys is Llandough. Here a Romano-British villa was constructed in the 2nd century, on the site of an Iron Age roundhouse, and occupied until the 4th century. To the north of the Roman villa is the church of St Dochdwy, and excavations adjacent to the church uncovered part of a large monastic cemetery. “In all 1,026 inhumation burials were examined, by far the largest early medieval burial population so far recovered from Wales.” Sherds of imported Bii amphorae from the eastern Mediterranean (the area around Antioch) were found in the backfill of five graves indicating activity at Llandough in the late 5th or 6th century. “Radiocarbon dates indicate that burial had commenced by the mid-7th century at latest, and it appears that the cemetery continued in use until the demise of the monastery in the late 10th or early 11th century.”<sup>38</sup> The graves include men, women and children<sup>39</sup>:

On some monastic sites the presence of female burials has been considered to be indicative of a lay population, although it is doubtful if this need necessarily be so as historical evidence suggests that marriage

amongst the Welsh clergy was commonplace from the outset.

One of the burials was found with an early medieval girdle: the burial dated from the 5th or 6th century, and the girdle has been interpreted as a hernia truss, such as are found in Merovingian graves of the 6th and 7th century in France and Germany<sup>40</sup>. Grave goods were found in other burials, including a large complete Roman melon bead dated to the 1st or 2nd century, a Polden Hill-type brooch of the 1st century AD, 4th century Roman coins, iron hobnails from Roman hobnail boots, small glass annular beads, and a single-edged blade dated to the 11th century<sup>41</sup>. Although some of the grave goods were Romano-British, the burials were radiocarbon dated to the early medieval period. A number of individuals were buried with white quartz pebbles. The reason for this is not known, but it may be linked to a line in Revelation 2.17 (King James Version): “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.”<sup>42</sup>

Not far from Llandough is Llancarfan, home to an early monastery dedicated to St Cadoc. An abbot of Llancarfan is first mentioned in a charter of 7th century date *Iacob abbas altaris Sancti Catoci* (“Jacob abbot of the altar of St Cadog”)<sup>43</sup>, and there is persistent independent evidence for its existence from the 9th century onwards. The Llandaff charters are witnessed by abbots, *magistri* (“masters”), *doctores* (“teachers”), *lectores* (“readers”), and priests from Llancarfan. In a charter from around 1075, Bishop Herewald’s son, Lifris, is named as *magister* of Llancarfan and archdeacon of Glamorgan. Another charter, with a date of around 980, includes a statement that the abbot of Llancarfan should always be worthy of episcopal honour. A “Lann Gharban” is mentioned in the 9th-10th century Irish *Lives of St Finnian* implying a monastic settlement, and a late 9th century pillar-cross, preserved in Llancarfan churchyard, also suggests the site of an ecclesiastical community<sup>44</sup>.



### *Carmarthenshire (South Wales)*

St Teilo's Church in Llandeilo, on the River Towy at the edge of the Brecon Beacons, is situated within a large, curvilinear churchyard, and is a conspicuous feature in the town. The pre-conquest Lichfield gospels, which date from the 8th or 9th century, mentions an ecclesiastical establishment at Llandeilo Fawr. Two 10th-11th century knotwork decorated cross-heads are located within the church, in the north aisle. One was discovered beneath the chancel during the 1850s restoration, and the other had been discovered by 1893. A Latin-inscribed stone stood in the churchyard in 1697, but was lost by 1893<sup>45</sup>.

### *Pembrokeshire (Southwest Wales)*

Longbury Bank is a low-lying promontory situated in the parish of Penally, in southeast Pembrokeshire, just over a mile east of the medieval walled town of Tenby, and half a mile northwest of Penally itself. Excavations in 1988-9 produced a series of artefacts which provide evidence of high status: imported Mediterranean pottery, continental pottery and glass, fine metalworking debris, and an unusual Type G penannular brooch, all dating from the 6th and 7th centuries. There is no documentary evidence for an early medieval settlement at Longbury Bank, but a monastery of Penally and its abbot are mentioned in several Llandaff charters dated to the 7th century. Four or five stone crosses of the 9th to 10th centuries indicate that the monastery at Penally was of considerable status in the immediate pre-Norman period<sup>46</sup>.

Caldey Island is off the south coast of Pembrokeshire, not far from Longbury Bank, and a priory was founded there in 1113 as a daughter house of the Tironensian St Dogmael's Abbey. In the sanctuary of the old priory church there is a 5 foot 7 inch high 5th or 6th century Ogham inscribed stone known as The Caldey Stone. At the top right and left edges are incomplete notched inscriptions in memory of MAGLIA DUBRACUNAS – “[The stone] of Maglia – Dubracunas, son of ...”. Dubracunas was associated with St Illtud and St Samson, and is said to have consecrated

Samson as abbot of Caldey in succession to Piro. The Latin inscription, carved in the 9th century, is on the front face and is taken to be ET SIGNO CRUCIS IN ILLAM FIGSI ROGO OMNIBUS AMMULANTIBUS IBI EXORENT PRO ANIMAE CATUOCONI – “And by the sign of the cross which I have provided upon that stone, I ask all who walk there that they pray for the soul of Catuocunus”<sup>47</sup>. Caldey Island is mentioned in the Life of Samson, who visited the monastery when it was ruled by a priest called Piro<sup>48</sup>.

St Brynach is associated with the small village of Nevern on the River Nevern in Pembrokeshire. There is a church at Nevern dedicated to St Brynach – it dates from the 15th century, but has a 12th century tower. In the churchyard is a late 10th or early 11th century cross, and a stone with a 5th or 6th century Latin inscription that reads VITALIANA / EMERETO, “(The stone) of Vitalianus Emereto”. Inside the church, built into the sills of the southern transept windows, are two further stones. One has a Latin inscription reading vertically down: MAGLOCVNI FILI CLUTOR, “(The stone) of Maglocunus, son of Clutorius”<sup>49</sup>.

Llanychlwydog 1 cross-incised stone stands to the south-west of the former St David’s Church, Llanychlwydog near Fishguard. “It was first noted in 1883, and is thought to have been found during the 1864 demolition of the church and erected on the building’s south side. Excavations within the churchyard in the 1984-1985 revealed a number of cist graves, one of which was radiocarbon dated to around 890 AD. The stone would almost certainly have functioned as an upright grave marker within the early medieval cemetery excavated within the churchyard. It is one of four early medieval stones found within the churchyard”<sup>50</sup>.

### *Ceredigion*

St. David, the national saint of Wales, was associated from the 11th century with the cathedral city of St Davids in Pembrokeshire – but his cult may have begun in Ceredigion, to the north of Pembrokeshire. The church of St. David in Llanddewi Brefi (Ceredigion) “is situated within a curvilinear

churchyard, bounded by the River Brefi on its north side. It is possible that the church was constructed on the site of a bronze age barrow. The site is thought to have been an early monastic settlement, and its oldest inscribed stone, Llanddewi Brefi 1, dates to the sixth century. The church is first mentioned in documents of the eleventh century when it was named by Rhygyfarch, in his Life of David, as the location of the Synod of Llanddewi Brefi in around 550.” The church has a total of six Early Christian carved stones – the largest concentration of Early Christian carved stones in Ceredigion<sup>51</sup>.

### *Conwy (North Wales)*

In the later Middle Ages, Wales’ best known female saint was Gwenfrewi (also known as Winefride), who came to be associated with Holywell in Flintshire, northeast Wales. However, Gwenfrewi was originally abbess of the monastery at Gwytherin in Conwy, where she died – her grave there was a place of pilgrimage until her body was taken to Shrewsbury in 1138<sup>52</sup>. “Recently a fragment of an eighth-century reliquary from Gwytherin, the Arch Gwenfrewi (Winifred’s Casket), was found, witnessing her status as a recognised saint almost from the moment of her death, around 650 – the earliest such surviving evidence for any Welsh saint”. On the north side of St Winifred’s Church is an east-west line of four stones, generally 3 feet high, the westernmost of which bears the vertical inscription: VINNEMAGLI FILI/SENNEMAGLI. This inscription is thought to signify “of Vinnemaglus son of Senemaglus” and probably dates from the 5th-6th century. The stones, in particular the inscription, have been associated with an early medieval monastic complex<sup>53</sup>.

### *Powys (East-Central Wales)*

The best known saint in Powys was Melangell, associated with Pennant Melangell near Llangynog in Powys. Pennant Melangell, in the remote Tanat valley, 14 km northwest of the nearest small town of Llanfyllin, lies on the valley floor where a stream, Nant Ewyn, enters the River Tanat.

Behind the churchyard, the ground rises steeply for nearly 300m to the heights of Pen Cerrig. Excavations at Pennant Melangell church discovered part of a Middle Bronze Age cremation cemetery dating from around 1200 BC<sup>54</sup>, suggesting continuity from the Bronze Age to the Christian era.

Excavations at St Melangell Church have revealed evidence of an earlier cemetery, pre-dating the Romanesque church. The church, possibly built by the 12th-century nobleman Rhirid Flaidd, commemorated by the poet Cynddelw as priodawr pennant (proprietor of Pennant), was evidently built with an apsidal grave chapel at its eastern end, enclosing a prominent grave which is traditionally held to be that of Melangell<sup>55</sup>.

## THE WEST MIDLANDS AND NORTHWEST ENGLAND

### *Herefordshire*

After the departure of the Romans, the Britons of western Herefordshire formed the kingdom of Ergyng, a name perhaps derived from the Roman town of Ariconium. Ergyng's greatest saint was Dubricius, who established a monastic community at Henllan, or "Old Church Enclosure" (now Hentland in Herefordshire). After seven years, Dubricius moved his monastic community to Mochros, or "Swine Moor" (now Moccas). In the 5th or 6th century King Peibio of Ergyng gave bishop Dubricius the estate or manor of Lann Custenhin Garth Benni, at what is now Welsh Bicknor in Herefordshire. It is called "Ecclesia Sancti Custenin de Biconovria" in a charter of 1144, and is constantly mentioned in the Book of Llandaff, a history of the diocese of Llandaff in Wales (now part of Cardiff). Evidently it was a place of some importance, since it bore the name of Constantine, the king of Dumnonia who founded Lann Custenhin Garth Benni ("Church and Monastic Enclosure of Constantine the Blessed")<sup>56</sup>.

### *Shropshire*

After the Roman legions withdrew from Britain, Wroxeter in Shropshire (Roman Viroconium) seems to have flourished. A large timber-framed

villa-type building was erected on the baths basilica site which faced south towards the remains of the baths complex. “This was constructed within the remains of the villa as though in a courtyard. Many small ancillary buildings lay to the west, south and east, some of which appeared to be storage facilities.” The north wall of the frigidarium (cold pool) of the baths still survives today (the Old Work), and it is thought that in the post-Roman period the frigidarium was converted into a church, since there are burials located outside the west end within the hypocausts and courtyards of the bath<sup>57</sup>. All this seems to have happened in the 6th century, under the direction of a ruler of Powys or, more likely, a bishop.

### *Cheshire*

The legionary fortress at Chester had acquired an increasingly significant civilian role in the last century of its existence, and may have remained the focus of some kind of territorial unit, according to the Victoria County History. “By the time of the Northumbrian king Æthelfrith’s victory over the British in 616, Chester was in territory associated with the British kingdom of Powys and was perhaps the seat of a branch of the royal dynasty of the Cadelling, whose representatives were prominent in the battle. The fact that a little later, lands to the south, in Shropshire, were in the hands of a different dynasty suggests that the Cadelling who fought at Chester were confined to Cheshire and north Wales, and hence likely to have made use of the fortress. Under their rule, too, the area was ecclesiastically important. The city was probably the scene of a synod of the British Church shortly after 600, and just to the south there seems to have been an early mother church at Eccleston. Further south was the great monastery of Bangor (Flintshire), whose monks were allegedly slaughtered by the Northumbrians at the battle of Chester as they prayed for a British victory”<sup>58</sup>.

From the 5th century onwards the amphitheatre at Chester “may have been used as a fortified settlement for occupation or as a refuge; therefore the north entrance may have been the only one still in use, which is

suggested by the metalled path leading from here to the timber buildings in the centre of the arena. Amphitheatres were used as early post-Roman fortifications elsewhere in Europe and the building of the church of St John immediately outside in the east entrance in the 7th century may be further evidence of the existence of a settlement at the amphitheatre”<sup>59</sup>.

### *Lancashire*

Lancashire is in the west of England, far from early Anglo-Saxon settlement, so some Celtic place-names are found there. Wigan, now part of Greater Manchester, appears to be based on a personal name attested in Cornwall. Two individuals named Wigan appear in the records of Cornish lands held by Merton Priory in Surrey for the period 1107-1121 CE. One of these individuals is named twice. The relevant passages read<sup>60</sup>:

“Ruald, son of Wigan, gave and granted to Bernard the Scriptor all the ecclesiastical lands which he held of Brictricius Walensis ...”

“The thicket of the Castle of the fee of Ruald, son of Wigan ...”

“At which were present, Robert de Turci ... William, son of Odo ... Wiganus Marescall.”

Moreover these records contain another interesting entry:

“The land of Botwei de Wigan of the fee of Richard de Luci.”

So we have here, in the records of the Priory, the use of Wigan as both a personal and a place-name.

Several place-names near Wigan are also Celtic. Ince is related to Welsh *ynys* “island”; the first element of Makerfield, a district near Wigan, is related to Welsh *magwyr* “wall”, derived from Latin *maceria*; Bryn is related to Welsh *bryn* “hill”; and the first element of Pemberton is related to Welsh *pen* “summit, highest point.”

### *Cumbria*

Birdoswald was a Roman fort on Hadrian’s Wall in Cumbria, near the

border with Northumberland. Birdoswald is situated in a commanding position on a triangular spur of land bounded by cliffs to the south and east overlooking a broad meander of the River Irthing. Birdoswald was constructed from 117 AD, first as a fort of turf and timber, and later as a larger stone fort. During the first half of the 3rd century there is evidence for rebuilding before the site was abandoned for a period, from the end of the 3rd century, and re-occupied in the early 4th century. During the late 4th/early 5th century, the south granary was converted for residential use. “During the 5th century AD a sequence of timber buildings were erected on the site of the north granary. The site was possibly abandoned altogether by about 520 AD”<sup>61</sup>. There seems little doubt that the fort became a British stronghold in the 5th century.

## THE EAST MIDLANDS

### *Lincolnshire*

The most important Roman town in Lincolnshire was the colony of Lindum (now Lincoln), and in the early Saxon period there was kingdom there which Bede called Lindissi, and is now known as Lindsey. This name is ultimately derived from British-Latin *Lindenses*, “people of Lindum”, meaning people from the Lindum district or region. The Royal genealogy of the Anglo-Saxon kings of Lindsey is preserved in the 8th century Anglian Collection, and according to the historian Caitlin R. Green<sup>62</sup>, one of the ancestors of Aldfrith, the last king of Lindsey, is a certain Cædbæd, who probably lived in the early to mid 6th century and whose name is at least half Celtic (see Welsh *cad* “battle”).

This implies that the area around Lincoln remained British after the departure of the Romans, which is borne out by evidence from Lincoln and from further afield. At St. Paul in the Bail, inside the former Roman forum of Lindum, there is “a highly complex sequence of burials and east-west orientated buildings. The earliest structure on this site appears to be a rectangular timber building, probably identifiable as a small church. Cutting

the foundations of this building is a timber apsidal structure which is generally agreed to have been a church”<sup>63</sup>. Three burials are associated with the second church and have been radiocarbon dated to the 5th-7th century. It is worth pointing out that by the early 4th century Lincoln had its own bishop: Adelphus, bishop of Lincoln, was sent to the Council of Arles in 314.

Outside Lincoln there is “a concentration of British Class I penannular brooches in Lindsey – twelve such brooches have so far been discovered, dating to the 5th and 6th centuries. Nationally these brooches are concentrated around the Severn estuary and in the Votadini territory north of Hadrian’s Wall”<sup>64</sup>, although the ones in Lindsey were made locally. They were probably worn as a sign of ethnic identity and are most common on the fringes of British Lindsey: three, for example, have been found in Kirmington, which lies well to the north of Lincoln<sup>65</sup>.

## NORTHEAST ENGLAND

### *West Yorkshire*

We know from Bede that until the early 7th century there was a British kingdom in West Yorkshire called Elmet, which has the same name as Elfed in the Welsh kingdom of Dyfed<sup>66</sup> (now to the north of Carmarthen in Carmarthenshire). The name survives in place-names like Barwick-in-Elmet (West Yorkshire), 7 miles east of Leeds, and Sherburn-in-Elmet (North Yorkshire), which lies to the east of Barwick. Leeds is derived from Latin *Latenses* “people of the River Lat”, presumably an old name for the River Aire<sup>67</sup>.

### *North Yorkshire*

By the 7th century northeast England and southeast Scotland were part of the kingdom of Northumbria. Catterick in North Yorkshire was known in Roman times as Cataractonium (perhaps “Battle-Ramparts”, related to Welsh *cad* “battle”, and Old Irish *rath/raith* “rampart”<sup>68</sup>). The Roman town



began life as a fort in the late 1st century, but soon became a civilian settlement. “Timber buildings, probably shops and workshops, were erected on the main east-west road in the 2nd century. Further north, a more complex building with stone foundations covered nearly an acre and probably included a bath house. In the first half of the 3rd century some shops were rebuilt in stone, one being used as a temple podium. The late 3rd century town wall destroyed many existing buildings and the whole layout of the town was radically altered in the early 4th century. Later the temple was pulled down and the podium used for shop stalls. Building continued to the last half of the 4th century, a flourishing community still existing at the end of the century.” Anglo-Saxon brooches were also found at Catterick, with occupation continuing into the 6th century<sup>69</sup>. Timber buildings were constructed on the site of Roman buildings, probably in the 5th century<sup>70</sup>.

## SOUTHERN SCOTLAND

### *Scottish Borders*

Yarrow is in the Scottish Borders near Selkirk, and the early 6th century Yarrow Stone carries a Latin inscription: HIC MEMORIA PERPETUA. IN LOCO INSIGNISIMI PRINCIPES NVDI DVNOGENI. HIC IACENT IN TVMVLO DVO FILLI LIBERALI, “This is the eternal memorial: in this place lie the most illustrious Nudus and Dumnogenus . Here lie in the grave the two sons of Liberalis”<sup>71</sup>. This “well-known early Christian monument” was turned up by the plough at the beginning of the 19th century; it was then “lying prone just under the surface and the remains of human bones were found underneath it. At this time there were about twenty “large cairns” on the moor ... With this stone must be associated two uninscribed stones in the vicinity – the Glebe Stone, 530 yards to the east-northeast, and the stone at the Warrior’s Rest, 800 yards to the northeast, which “marks the site of an Early Christian cemetery”<sup>72</sup>.

## *Edinburgh*

After the Romans, left the Votadini, who had been based at Traprain Law in East Lothian, emerged as the heroes of the Welsh poem *Y Gododdin* (“The Votadini”), a series of elegies for warriors who fell in battle against vastly superior numbers. The warriors of the *Gododdin* were based at Din Eidyn, and the battle was fought at Catraeth (Catterick in North Yorkshire). Din Eidyn is thought to be the hill where Edinburgh Castle now stands. The area of Edinburgh Castle known as Mill’s Mount produced the earliest finds and occupation features (cobbled surfaces and hearths) dated to the early centuries AD, providing tentative evidence for the existence of native Iron Age and Dark Age forts. The principal finds were Roman and native pottery and a fibula brooch dated to the 1st-2nd centuries, sealed by layers which produced a comb dated 7th-10th centuries AD<sup>73</sup>.

## *Dumfries and Galloway*

At least part of Dumfries and Galloway was under Northumbrian control by the early 8th century, but there is abundant evidence of a thriving British community before then. The Iron Age hillfort of Trusty’s Hill is at Anwoth near Gatehouse of Fleet and the Solway Firth, and was reoccupied in the early medieval period. It is the only place in Galloway where the Picts are known to have left a recognisable mark. Carved on a rock beside the entrance passage are a series of Pictish symbols, including a water beast and a double disc traversed by a Z-shaped rod<sup>74</sup>. Pictish symbols, which date from the early medieval period, are usually found in eastern Scotland, and one of the only other sites in western Scotland with a Pictish symbol is the hillfort of Dunadd in Argyll and Bute, thought to be the stronghold of the Dark Age kingdom of Dal Riata.

Recently the Galloway Picts Project and GUARD Archaeology excavated Trusty’s Hill and found that it was a high-status site<sup>75</sup>:

An abundance of domestic rubbish, including animal bones, a rotary quern, tools and a spindle whorl demonstrate that Trusty’s Hill was

once the home of a small community. There was also clear evidence, in the form of crucibles, a clay mould and iron slag, that metalworking and the production of high status jewellery was being carried out in part of the site. But the clincher for the Galloway Picts Team was the discovery of high status jewellery itself and even rarer pottery sherds from France. The pottery sherd not only dates to the seventh century AD, exactly the right time when Pictish Symbols were being carved in Scotland, but are so rare from this period that only people of the highest status – kings, princes, lords and bishops – acquired this pottery.

Not far from Trusty's Hill is Dumfries and Galloway's most famous monastery, at Whithorn, which is said to have been founded by St Ninian. St Ninian is mentioned in the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*<sup>76</sup>: Bede says that Ninian was "a most reverend bishop and holy man of the nation of Britons" who had been trained in Rome. The Episcopal see was named after St Martin of Tours and his church was known as Candida Casa ("Shining House") because it was built from limestone (recent excavations have found spreads of burnt limestone, plaster and cement, possibly the remains of this limestone church). Excavations between 1984 and 1991 demonstrated that the site was in use from Roman times: finds include sherds of glass, pottery (both coarse ware and samian) and amphorae all largely belonging to the 2nd or 3rd centuries AD. The 1984-1991 excavations concentrated on Northumbrian remains of 700-850 AD but also found evidence for the 5th to 7th centuries. Low-lying ground revealed a complex of curvilinear ditches, pits and stakeholes interleaved with waterborne silts which had been severely disturbed by 7th century mouldboard ploughing. A rich assemblage of finds included 6th century African Red Slipware made near Carthage in Tunis; amphorae from the eastern Mediterranean; cordoned bowls and bowls with internal rouletted or stamped ornament from northern or southern Gaul; 6th-7th century jars, bowls and jugs in hard granular grey wares, probably produced in western or central France; and numerous cone beaker sherds which date from the

5th-6th century, and were produced in Frankish glass workshops in France, Belgium or Germany. An extensive 7th century cemetery on higher ground contained at least 50 graves mostly laid out in regular rows. Graves include long cists with and without stone cover slabs<sup>77</sup>.

One of the oldest objects found at Whithorn is the Latinus stone. Carved around 450 AD, it was erected to Latinus and his unnamed daughter, and would have stood by an early Christian church and cemetery, pre-dating the later churches on the hilltop at Whithorn. The inscription on the stone is in Latin and when translated reads: “We praise you, the Lord! Latinus, descendant of Barrovados, aged 35, and his daughter, aged 4, made a sign here”. There are traces of the Christian “chi-rho” symbol above the lettering, which might be the ‘sign’ referred to in the inscription<sup>78</sup>.

## WESTERN SCOTLAND

### *West Dunbartonshire*

There were also Britons to the north of Dumfries and Galloway. Alcluith, now known as Dumbarton (“Fort of the Britons”), is on the River Clyde to the west of Glasgow and is mentioned by Bede in his Ecclesiastical History. In describing the western of the two arms of the sea which divided the Picts from the Britons – that is, the Firths of Forth and Clyde – Bede writes<sup>79</sup>: “there is up to the present a strongly defended political centre of the Britons called Alcluith”. Elsewhere he calls it urbs Alcluith (“city of Alcluith”), and explains that Alcluith “means Clyde Rock in their language” (i.e. that of the Britons; Petra Cluit in Latin) “because it is beside the river of that name”<sup>80</sup>. Adomnan, in his Life of St Columba, also mentions a ‘King Roderic, son of Tothal, who reigned on the Rock of Cluaith’ (Clyde Rock). In 870 AD, the Annals of Ulster record that two kings of the Norsemen, Olaf and Ivar, besieged the citadel for four months, and ultimately destroyed and plundered it, and this is the last we hear of the name<sup>81</sup>.

Dumbarton Rock, now the site of Dumbarton Castle, was excavated in 1974-5 in the hope of finding the remains of the early medieval fortress,

and a number of artefacts dating from the 6th to the 8th century were uncovered. There were the remains of Class B amphorae, representing a total of seven or eight amphorae in which wine had been imported from the Mediterranean in the 6th century AD. There were three sherds of Class E pottery – this consists of high-quality kitchen and table ware, suitable for high-status-households in the absence of any local pottery-production. “It was imported from undiscovered centres in Gaul, beginning perhaps in the late 6th century AD, running through the 7th, and then for several decades at least into the 8th century as well.” There were also six sherds of glass best defined as “Germanic”, which might belong to the 6th and 7th centuries<sup>82</sup>.

### *Argyll and Bute*

The main political power in the west of Scotland was Dal Riata, with its stronghold on the hillfort of Dunadd at Kilmartin in Argyll and Bute. Dunadd was excavated by Alan Lane in the 1980s. A sequence of dates for the fortifications have been obtained, showing the development of the site from a middle and later Iron Age summit dun (fort) to an early medieval multi-ramparted “nuclear fort”. Dunadd reached its greatest extent in the 8/9th centuries AD, but rapidly declined after this<sup>83</sup>.

A major metalworking workshop of the 7th century AD was uncovered on Site 3. This provided evidence for the working of gold, silver, copper alloys, lead, iron, leather, wood and stone. Large numbers of crucible and mould fragments for penannular brooches and other objects enabled reconstruction of casting technology using scientific and other analyses. They also provide valuable dating evidence for the typological sequence of brooches, and the development of large panelled annular brooches of the Hunterston/Tara type, and showed that these were being manufactured in Dal Riata at an early period. Some brooches show clear signs of adaption from Anglo-Saxon types, and it is possible to see Dunadd as one of the key sites in the development of

the Insular Art Style of the great illuminated manuscripts such as the Book of Kells ...

Trading links were shown by imported pottery and glass from France, and other materials from a wide variety of sources including the Mediterranean. These show that Dunadd was an important redistribution centre for luxury commodities, and that this trade was under royal control.

On a rock ridge in front of Dunadd's two uppermost enclosures are several rock carvings. These include a boar allegedly in the Pictish style and protected by a glass, two or three lines of ogham inscription, a hollowed-out basin and a footprint. The boar perhaps dates from 736 AD when Dunadd was besieged and captured by Oengus, King of the Picts, as reported in the Annals of Ulster. The footprint and basin probably mark the site of the inauguration of new kings of the Scots<sup>84</sup>. After this the kingdom of Dal Riata was under Pictish control until the early 9th century, when it was destroyed by Norse raiders.

### *Inner Hebrides*

Early Christianity in Scotland is inextricably linked to the Irish monk St Columba, who founded a monastery on the small island of Iona, off the west coast of Scotland, in 563 AD. The monastery existed until about the turn of the 8th – 9th centuries when the wooden complex was destroyed by Norse raiders. Nothing remains above ground of the original monastery except possibly the vallum, the bank and ditch that enclosed the monastery, and the cell on Tor Abb said to have been used by St Columba. Excavations have shown that the Columban monastery, which consisted of about a dozen huts and a small church, lay in the vicinity of the early 13th century abbey. A few grave-slabs of the 7th and 8th centuries, generally simple incised or outline crosses, still survive from the early monastery<sup>85</sup>. Columba died in 597, and by 700 he was being venerated as a saint.

## EASTERN SCOTLAND

### *The Picts and their Symbol Stones*

As I said, the Picts lived in eastern Scotland to the north of the Firth of Forth, and there is general agreement that the Picts spoke a Celtic language related to Welsh, or rather, to the language spoken by their neighbors living in southern Scotland and northern England. There is one curiosity of Pictish place-names, and that is the number of settlements containing the element *Pit-*, including Pitbladdo in Fife, Pitsligo in Aberdeenshire, Pittendreich in Moray, Pitlochry in Perthshire, and Pittenweem in Fife. The word was earlier *pett*, meaning a parcel of land or farmland, related to Gaulish *petia* (from which French *pièce* is derived<sup>86</sup>. The Welsh equivalent *peth* means “thing” and apparently has no connection with land.

Today the Picts are best known for their symbol stones, monumental stones carved with symbols or designs, which are found from Fife in the south to Orkney in the north (and also at Trusty’s Hill and Dunadd). There are two main types of symbol stones Class I are unworked stones which carry only symbols, and date from the 6th-8th century. Class II are stones of more or less rectangular shape with a large cross and symbol(s) on one or both sides. The symbols, as well as Christian motifs, are carved in relief and the cross with its surroundings is filled with designs; these date from the 8th-9th century. The most common symbols are the crescent and V-rod, double disc and Z-rod, mirror and comb, triple disc, and Pictish beast. The Pictish beast is “a sinuous animal with a long snout, spiralled feet and a drooping, typically spiral-ended tail”<sup>87</sup>. The archaeologist Craig Cessford says<sup>88</sup> that the Pictish beast may have been inspired by Romano-British dragonesque brooches of the 1st and 2nd century AD, which are found in northern England and southern Scotland, the closest to Pictland being those found at Traprain Law in East Lothian; subsequently, he says, the Pictish beast “acquired elements based upon sea mammals such as dolphins and beaked whale”.

## PICTLAND

### *Fife*

Pictish influence extended from Fife to north of the Moray Firth, and I will survey a few of the more interesting Pictish sites. Norrie's Law is a tumulus near Lower Largo in Fife, not far from the Firth of Forth. Several stone cists, yielding burnt bones and a small urn, were found in the tumulus, and in 1819-22 a hoard of silver ornaments and pieces of thin silver plate, were found in, or near, a cist at the base of the Law. The silver hoard is probably 7th to 8th century AD. One of the silver plaques from the hoard has two Pictish symbols – the double disc and Z-rod, and the dog's head. A Class II Pictish stone called the Largo Cross has also been found in the vicinity: on the front is sculptured a Celtic cross and a pair of intertwined sea-monsters; on the reverse are three men on horseback and two hounds, a double disc and Z-rod, and a Pictish beast<sup>89</sup>.

### *Perth and Kinross*

Forteviot in Perth and Kinross was the site of a Neolithic ceremonial complex and a rich Early Bronze Age burial, and it also became an important Pictish centre. According to the Pictish Chronicle, the Pictish king Kenneth MacAlpin (Cinaed mac Ailpin) died in his palace at Forteviot in 858. Nothing remains of the palace, but the church at Forteviot is said to have been founded around 761<sup>90</sup>:

A stone arch carved with a cross and the Agnus Dei was found before 1831 in the bed of the River May immediately below the Holy Hill [...] The arch stone is now in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (NMAS) but it is not certain whether it came from the palace at Forteviot or the old church. Within the modern Forteviot church is a bronze hand bell considered to be 10th century and a relic of the old church

### *Aberdeenshire*



The Craw Stane at Rhynie in Aberdeenshire is a Pictish symbol stone dated to the 7th century – one broad face is incised with the fish symbol above the Pictish beast symbol. Since 2012 Dr Gordon Noble from the University of Aberdeen and AOC Archaeology have been excavating a 5th-6th century palisaded enclosure at the site of the Craw Stane<sup>91</sup>.

Evaluation trenches revealed a system of defensive enclosure boundaries, and within these, a ring ditch structure and evidence for one or more timber buildings. Some of the finds from the outer enclosure ditch, including a sherd of glass from an imported drinking bowl and fragments from a Roman amphora of the late fifth to mid-sixth century, imported from the Mediterranean, suggested high-status activity with fine dining and drinking.

### *Moray*

The centre of Pictish power probably lay around the Moray Firth. Burghead in Moray, on the coast of the Moray Firth, is the site of a massive promontory fort, possibly constructed in the 4th century AD. In the interior, says Dark,<sup>92</sup>

there is an elaborately rock-cut well surrounded by a walkway ... Most remarkably, 25-30 Pictish symbol stones – all depicting naturalistic bulls – were found here. This could ... represent the workshop of a symbol stone-carver, specialising in bulls, but it is at least as likely that these carvings were associated with a ritual centre. There are suggestions that Burghead was a ritual centre at an earlier date: a ‘Celtic’ stone head carved with a drooping moustache is said to be from this well

The Burghead Well is a rock-hewn well which consists of a flight of 20 steps leading down to a chamber, within which is sunk a tank fed by springs. When the well was cleared out, a number of finds were made, including one of the bull symbol stones, a number of Spanish coins, a bell metal jug, and a square stone with a cross on it<sup>93</sup>.

Since 2015 a team of archaeologists have been excavating Burghead. Previously, it had been thought that it had been thoroughly destroyed by 19th-century development, but, once the team moved past the Victorian rubble, they discovered that parts of the Pictish settlement had survived. Occupation ended when the fort was destroyed during the Viking Age, but the large fire that brought an end to occupation of the site also helped to preserve its remains into the present. One of the main finds during the current excavation has been a Pictish longhouse. An Anglo-Saxon coin of Alfred the Great (871-899) was discovered within the floor layers of the house<sup>94</sup>:

‘There is a lovely stone-built hearth in one end of the building, and the Anglo-Saxon coin shows the building dates toward the end of the use of the fort based on previous dating,’ said Gordon. ‘The coin is also pierced, perhaps for wearing; it shows that the occupants of the fort in this non-monetary economy literally wore their wealth.’ In the project’s most recent work, a midden was also excavated, revealing aspects of daily life at the fort with finds including intricate dress- and hairpins.

It is likely that Burghead was a naval base: the site is located “close to an excellent anchorage, an extensive beach in the bend of the bay to the west of the site, which probably acted as landing place.” It is also likely the Picts had a navy. Classical sources of the first half of the first millennium AD suggest that the inhabitants of this area made frequent use of boats in their encounters with the Roman empire. There is also documentary evidence that the Picts possessed strong naval forces: the Irish Annals of Tigernach in 729 AD record that “A hundred and fifty Pictish ships were wrecked upon Ros-Cuissine,” possibly Troup Head in Aberdeenshire. More generally there are references to military activities in the Orkneys, which must have involved movement by sea. In the 580s the Annals of Ulster record “A campaign in the Orkneys [was conducted] by Aidan, Gabran’s son”, and in the 680s the Annals of Tigernach state that “The Orkneys were destroyed

by Brude”<sup>95</sup> (a Pictish king).

### *Inverness*

The Iron Age vitrified hillfort of Craig Phadrig in Inverness was re-occupied in the early medieval period. Archaeological excavation has recovered imported pottery from France and a fragment of a bronze hanging bowl escutcheon (a type of decorative plate) all dating from around 600 CE. A massive silver chain, weighing almost six pounds and thought to be a symbol of Pictish kings was found nearby in Torvean in 1808<sup>96</sup>.

### *Easter Ross*

The earliest Pictish monastery was at Portmahomack in Easter Ross, to the north of Inverness. The monastery was founded in the 6th century, and by the 8th century had developed into an important political and industrial centre comparable with Iona. Signs of the monastery’s former prominence survive in workshops producing liturgical objects, possibly including books.

The ancient monastery has of course long since disappeared, but the east wall of the crypt of the present St Colman’s church, which was on a different alignment to the other walls and contained a simple aumbry (a small recess or cupboard built into the wall), is thought to represent the relic of a stone church of the 8th century<sup>97</sup>. The earliest burials at Portmahomack are those of middle-aged or elderly men, one of which dates from around 560 AD<sup>98</sup>. A number of workshops were identified at Portmahomack, with evidence of metal-working, glass-working, and leather-working, perhaps for the manufacture of vellum<sup>99</sup>. To the southeast of the workshop area, there was a mill<sup>100</sup>, and a kiln-barn which was used for the laying out, drying and malting of barley<sup>101</sup>. Portmahomack (Port Mo-Cholmaig) is conventionally the Port of Colman, but Colman is a common diminutive of Columba and the place can therefore also claim eligibility for an association with Columba himself<sup>102</sup>.

### *St. Columba in Pictland*

The most famous story involving St. Columba and his missionary work in

Pictland concerns a water monster in the River Ness. St. Columba was one day in the province of the Picts when he crossed the River Ness and saw some of the locals burying a man who had been bitten by a monster so severely that he died. On hearing this, the saint asked his companion Lugne Mocumin, to swim across the river. Lugne immediately leapt into the water<sup>103</sup>:

But the monster, which, so far from being satiated, was only roused for more prey, was lying at the bottom of the stream, and when it felt the water disturbed above by the man swimming, suddenly rushed out, and, giving an awful roar, darted after him, with its mouth wide open, as the man swam in the middle of the stream. Then the blessed man observing this, raised his holy hand, while all the rest, brethren as well as strangers, were stupefied with terror, and, invoking the name of God, formed the saving sign of the cross in the air, and commanded the ferocious monster, saying, “Thou shalt go no further, nor touch the man; go back with all speed.” Then at the voice of the saint, the monster was terrified, and fled more quickly than if it had been pulled back with ropes, though it had just got so near to Lugne, as he swam, that there was not more than the length of a spear-staff between the man and the beast.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Celtic Britain After the Romans (2) Celtic Saints and Animals*

#### SAINTS AND ANIMALS IN EARLY CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

Some of the earliest saints were the 4th and 5th century Desert Fathers of Egypt, who were often associated with animals. Whenever St. Pachomius needed to cross a river crocodiles “would carry him with the utmost subservience and set him down at whatever spot he indicated. A monk of Sapsas “was so full of grace that he was able to welcome lions into his cave and offer them food in his lap. Saint Jerome, in his Vita of Saint Hilarion, claimed that his subject was able to tame animals who had gone wild, giving the example of a camel which had become possessed by the devil and trampled people to death”<sup>1</sup>.

Such tales of saints and animals were soon adopted by European writers of saints’ lives. St. Martin, who died in 397, was bishop of Tours in Roman Gaul, and his Life was written in the early 5th century by Sulpicius Severus. According to Sulpicius the saint saved a hare exhausted by its long run from a huntsman’s dogs<sup>2</sup>:

The blessed man through his pious judgement took compassion on it in its danger and ordered the dogs to leave off following it and let the fugitive get away. They pulled up at once, at the first words of the order ... And so, with its pursuers pinned down, the little hare got safely away.

#### SAINTS AND ANIMALS IN BRITAIN

### *Cornish Saints*

Naturally writers of saints' lives in Britain also linked their saints to animals. In Cornwall, as I said earlier, a wild boar miraculously obeyed St. Kew, and Petroc also saved an animal. The writer of the first Life of Petroc describes a wealthy man named Constantine hunting deer at Little Petherick near Padstow. Petroc interrupted the hunt, saved the stag and converted Constantine and his warriors to the Christian faith<sup>3</sup>.

### *Welsh Saints*

However, there are more animal stories in Wales. According to the first life of St. Brynach of Nevern in Pembrokeshire, southwest Wales, the saint could tame wild animals<sup>4</sup>:

a cow, which he had segregated from the others, as if unique and singular for his need, both on account of the size of her body, because she was larger than the rest, and also on account of the abundance of her milk, he deputed to the custody of a wolf, which in the manner of a well-trained herdsman drove the cow in the morning to the pastures, and in the evening brought her home in safety

There is a charming story told in the Life of St. Melangell of Powys, which dates to the late 15th or early 16th century (although based on earlier written and oral sources that are no longer extant)<sup>5</sup>, and which shows that Melangell, like many Celtic saints, had an affinity with animals. One day a prince of Powys called Brychwel Ysgithrog was out hunting and his dogs went in pursuit of a hare:

he too gave chase until he came to a certain thicket of brambles, which was large and full of thorns. In this thicket he found a girl of beautiful appearance who, given up to divine contemplation, was praying with the greatest devotion, with the said hare lying boldly and fearlessly under the hem or fold of her garments, its face toward the dogs.

Then the prince cried "Get it hounds, get it!" but the more he

shouted, urging them on, the further the dogs retreated and, howling, fled from the little animal. Finally, the prince, altogether astonished, asked the girl how long she had lived on her own on his lands. in such a lonely spot. In reply the girl said she had not seen a human face for these fifteen years.

Obviously this story is inspired by the Life of St. Martin of Tours.

### *Irish Saints*

Adomnan, in his 7th century Life of the Scottish saint Columba, makes it clear that the saint had a particular concern for birds<sup>6</sup>:

while the saint was living in [Iona], he called one of the brothers, and thus addressed him: In the morning of the third day from this date thou must sit down and wait on the shore on the western side of this island, for a crane, which is a stranger from the northern region of Hibernia, and hath been driven about by various winds, shall come, weary and fatigued, after the ninth hour, and lie down before thee on the beach quite exhausted. Treat that bird tenderly, take it to some neighbouring house, where it may be kindly received and carefully nursed and fed by thee for three days and three nights. When the crane is refreshed with the three days' rest, and is unwilling to abide any longer with us, it shall fly back with renewed strength to the pleasant part of Scotia (Ireland) from which it originally hath come. This bird do I consign to thee with such special care because it cometh from our own native place." The brother obeyed, and on the third day, after the ninth hour, he watched as he was bid for the arrival of the expected guest. As soon as the crane came and alighted on the shore, he took it up gently in its weakness, and carried it to a dwelling that was near, where in its hunger he fed it. On his return to the monastery in the evening, the saint, without any inquiry, but as stating a fact, said to him, "God bless thee, my child, for thy kind attention to this foreign visitor, that shall not remain long on its journey, but return within three days to its old home." As the saint

predicted, so exactly did the event prove, for after being nursed carefully for three days, the bird then gently rose on its wings to a great height in the sight of its hospitable entertainer, and marking for a little its path through the air homewards, it directed its course across the sea to Hibernia, straight as it could fly, on a calm day.

Other Irish saints were also associated with animals. St. Patrick is said to have brought Christianity to Ireland, and Muirchu, in his 7th century *Life of St Patrick*, tells this story. One day, as Patrick and several companions were surveying land at Armagh where a church was to be built, they climbed to the top of a hill<sup>7</sup>:

They found a deer, with her little fawn, lying in the place where is now an altar of the church of Armagh, and the associates of Patrick rashly wished to slay the fawn, but the Saint was unwilling, and did not permit it; but the Saint himself, holding the fawn, carried it on his shoulders, and the deer following him, even like a most attached sheep, until at length he let down the fawn in another wood, situated at the northern side of Armagh, where those persons skilled in such matters say, that some signs of his virtue remain even to this day.

St. Brigid of Kildare, who flourished in the late 5th and early 6th century, was also linked to wild animals. Her biographer Cogitosus tells us this story concerning a wild boar in Chapter 18<sup>8</sup>:

Once, a lone savage wild boar, fleeing in terror, arrived at the most blessed Brigit's herd of swine, rushing in headlong flight and, as she chanced to see it among her pigs, she blessed it. Thereupon, it remained with her flock of swine, unafraid and tame.

Later, in Chapter 21, Cogitosus tells this story regarding wild ducks<sup>9</sup>:

And another day, when Brigit saw ducks swimming in the water according to their natural instinct, and occasionally flying through the air, she bade them come to her.



In winged flight and with remarkable zeal for obedience, they began to fly to her in flocks without any fear, familiar with her calls as though domesticated. She touched them with her hand and took them in her arms and, after doing this for some time, she let them go back flying into the air on their own wings.

St Ailbe of Emly (Co. Tipperary) was even closer to animals than most saints. The Araid people of northeastern Limerick were trying to drive the wolves from their territory. A she-wolf took refuge with the saint, placing her head beneath his cowl, and Ailbe said: "Do not be afraid. It is fitting that you should flee to me and that I should defend you from your persecutors. Indeed, I, in the days of my infancy, when men had spurned me, was gently nourished by your kind."<sup>10</sup> Ailbe says this because, according to legend, in his infancy he was left in the forest to be devoured by wolves, but a she-wolf took compassion upon him and suckled him<sup>11</sup>.

St Columbanus was an Irish monk of the late 6th and early 7th century who founded monasteries at Luxeuil in Burgundy, eastern France, and Bobbio in northern Italy. His Life was written by Jonas, a monk of Bobbio, who mentions Columbanus's kinship with animals<sup>12</sup>:

And do not wonder that the beasts and birds thus obeyed command of the man of God. For we have learned from Chamnoald, royal chaplain at Laon, who was his attendant and disciple, that he has often seen Columban wandering about in the wilderness fasting and praying, and calling the wild beasts and birds. These came immediately at his command and he stroked them with his hand. The beasts and birds joyfully played, frisking about him, just as cats frisk about their mistresses. Chamnoald said he had often seen him call the little animal, which men commonly name a squiruis [= squirrel] from the tops of a tree and take it in his hand and put it on his neck and let it go into and come out from his bosom.

## SAINTS AND THE RESURRECTION OF ANIMALS

### *Welsh Saints*

There are other stories of British saints that involve not just animals but animal resurrection, recalling the Iron Age burials of humans with animals, and the claim by Greek and Roman writers that the Celts believed in reincarnation. Wales most famous saint is St. David of St Davids in Pembrokeshire, and Rhygyfarch tells this story about the saint which involves the resurrection of cattle. St. David had been told by an angel to establish a monastery at Vallis Rosina, and when he and his companions lit the first fire there the local warlord Baia noticed the smoke from the fire and, since this was on his land, he and his men decided to kill the saint<sup>13</sup>:

And Baia and his attendants came to kill David and his disciples; but walking along the road, a fever suddenly gripped them, and they could kill neither David nor his servants; but they blasphemed David and his holy servants and spoke evil words, for the will to do them injury was not lacking, even if the means to accomplish it was drained from them, having been thwarted by providence. When they were returning home from there, they found his wife coming to meet them. "Our cattle," she said, "and beasts of burden, and sheep and all the animals are dead." And Baia and his wife and his whole household all lamented very much, and everyone wailed alike and said, "That saint and his disciples, whom we have blasphemed, have killed our cattle; therefore let us return and ask for mercy on bended knees, and entreat the servant of God that he will thus have mercy both on us and our cattle." And turning back, they came to the servant of God; begging for mercy with tears and prayers, they said, "The land where you are shall be yours forever." And on that same day Baia gave holy David the whole of Vallis Rosina in perpetual possession. And David, the servant of God, responding in good spirit, said, "Your cattle will revive." And when he returned home, Baia found his cattle alive and well.

St. Tatheus, or Tathwy, was an Irish saint who settled in Gwent. The saint had a cow “so abounding in milk that by her the seven disciples with their master had food through summer and autumn time.” The cow was kept in a meadow and one day “esquires from the court” came with 147 horses and let the horses loose in the meadow, thereby destroying the meadow<sup>14</sup>.

But the saint bore it patiently, refusing to be angry, but prayed for the malefactors that they might be converted and alter for the better. The prayer being heard by the supreme Auditor, who has said, ‘Vengeance is mine and I will repay’, all the horses, which had injured the meadow, were found dead.

So the king came to St. Tatheus

kneeling and craving forgiveness, offering and promising to amend according to his will whatever wrong his men had done. That elect servant of God pardoned what injury they had done, unwilling to pray that they should be damned, although they were worthy of damnation, remembering the evangelical word of the Lord, who says, ‘I desire not the death of the wicked, but that he should be converted and live.’ When amends were made and completed, the horses, in the sight of all there, were made alive in a wonderful manner.

There is another story associated with Wales and St. Germanus of Auxerre that is told in the early 9th century *History of the Britons* attributed to the Welsh monk Nennius<sup>15</sup>:

At that time St. Germanus, distinguished for his numerous virtues, came to preach in Britain: by his ministry many were saved; but many likewise died unconverted. Of the various miracles which God enabled him to perform, I shall here mention only a few: I shall first advert to that concerning an iniquitous and tyrannical king, named Benlli. The holy man, informed of his wicked conduct, hastened to visit him, for the purpose of remonstrating him. When the man of God, with his

attendants, arrived at the gate of the city, they were respectfully received by the keeper of it, who came out and saluted them. Him they commissioned to communicate their intention to the king, who returned a harsh answer, declaring, with an oath, that although they remained there a year, they should not enter the city. While waiting for an answer, the evening came on, and they knew not where to go. At length, came one of the king's servants, who bowing himself before the man of God, announced the words of the tyrant, inviting them, at the same time, to his own house, to which they went, and were kindly received. It happened, however, that he had no cattle, except one cow and a calf, the latter of which, urged by generous hospitality to his guests, he killed, dressed and set before them. But holy St. Germanus ordered his companions not to break a bone of the calf; and, the next morning, it was found alive uninjured, and standing by its mother.

St. Germanus came from Roman Gaul and was not a Welsh saint, but the story is told in a Welsh context – Benlli was probably a king of Powys, and the hillfort of Foel Fenlli near Ruthin in Denbighshire is thought to be named after him.

### *Irish Saints*

But tales of saints resurrecting animals are most common in Ireland. There is a tale about St. Patrick that may well have inspired the story about St. David. A man called Daire had given Patrick some land on which to build his church, and one day he sent a horse to graze there. St. Patrick was offended and said<sup>16</sup>:

‘Dáire has behaved foolishly in sending brute animals to disturb the small place which he has given to God.’ (4) The groom, however, listened as little as if he were deaf, and like one who is dumb he did not open his mouth to speak, but left the horse there over night and went away.(5) Next day in the morning the groom came to look after the horse and by that time found it dead. He went home sadly and said to

his master: ‘Look, that Christian has killed your horse because it displeased him that his place was disturbed’, and Dáire said: ‘He also shall be killed. Go ye now and kill him.’ (6) The very moment his men went out sudden death struck Dáire, and his wife said: ‘This death is because of the Christian. Let somebody go at once and bring us his favours, and you will be well; and let those who have gone out to kill the Christian be stopped and told to return.’ (7) Two men, then, went out and said to him, concealing from him what had actually happened: ‘Look, Dáire has fallen ill. Give us something to bring him by which he may be healed.’ (8) Holy Patrick, however, knowing what had happened, said: ‘Is that so?’ blessed water and gave it to them, saying: ‘Sprinkle some of this water over your horse and take it with you.’ (9) And they did so and the horse revived, and they took it away with them, and when the holy water was sprinkled over Dáire he was healed.

There are other stories of Irish saints resurrecting animals. St. Cainnech of Aghaboe (Co. Laois) was staying with some nuns, and a lamb was killed for the saint’s dinner. “Cainnech is saddened by this when he learns of the lovable nature of the animal, and has the skin of the lamb stretched out before him. The saint calls to the animal and the lamb is restored to life whole.”<sup>17</sup>.

In the Irish Book of Lismore compiled in the early 15th century, there is a story of St. Columba (also known as Colomb Cille) resurrecting an ox<sup>18</sup>:

At another time Colomb Cille was left cooking an ox for the reapers. With them was a whilom [fomer]-hero of the men of Ireland, to wit, Mael Uma, son of Baedan. Colomb Cille asked him, how much his meal had been when he was a warrior. When I was a warrior, saith Mael Uma, I used to consume a fat ox to my full meal. Colomb Cille ordered him to eat his fill. Mael Uma did that for him. He consumed the whole ox. Afterwards Baithin came, and asked if the food were ready. So Colomb Cille ordered Mael Uma to gather into one place all the

bones of the ox. Thus was it done. Colomb blest the bones, and their own flesh was around them, and (the ox) was given to the reapers.

Another animal resurrection story is found in the 13th century Life of St. Abban<sup>19</sup>:

One day when Abban was with his foster-mother's calves, a wolf came to him. God commanded, said Abban, to help necessity. Eat this calf, said he, for thou art hungry. The wolf ate it, and thanked Abban for its meal. (7) But the other youths were grieved that the calf should have been devoured [by the wolf, and they went to complain of Abban to his foster-mother], and Abban was afraid of his foster-mother. Ah Jesus! said he, who didst create this calf without any material; create it now out of the material that is left of it here. The calf arose and joined the other calves, and bleated and frisked along with them.

There is also a resurrection story involving St. Ailbe of Emly. While on a journey through the continent, Ailbe resurrects a king's two beloved horses, which have been eaten by lions. The lions react to Ailbe in an affectionate manner: they "rub their manes over his feet as if they were linen."<sup>20</sup> But there is a price to pay: Ailbe demands a tribute of one hundred horses as due payment for his lions. "When the king complains that he does not have a hundred horses to give, Ailbe promises to solve the problem. He ascends a mountain and prays, so that out of a great cloud the required horses appear, and Ailbe gives them to the lions to eat."<sup>21</sup>.

## "RESURRECTION" IN IRISH MYTHOLOGY

As I said earlier, in Roman times there was a temple of Nodens at Lydney Park in Gloucestershire, and as I pointed out then, Nodens is the equivalent of Irish Nuada, a legendary Irish king who lost his arm in a battle and had it replaced with a silver prosthetic. The story of Nuada (Nuadu) is told in the Irish tale *Cath Maige Tuired* ("The Battle of Mag Tuired"), which dates

from the 9th century AD<sup>22</sup>:

Núadu's hand was cut off in that battle—Sreng mac Sengainn struck it from him. So with Crédne the brazier helping him, Dían Cécht the physician put on him a silver hand that moved as well as any other hand.

Now Núadu was being treated, and Dían Cécht put a silver hand on him which had the movement of any other hand. But his son Míach did not like that. He went to the hand and said 'joint to joint of it, and sinew to sinew'; and he healed it in nine days and nights. The first three days he carried it against his side, and it became covered with skin. The second three days he carried it against his chest. The third three days he would cast white wisps of black bulrushes after they had been blackened in a fire.

Dían Cécht did not like that cure. He hurled a sword at the crown of his son's head and cut his skin to the flesh. The young man healed it by means of his skill. He struck him again and cut his flesh until he reached the bone. The young man healed it by the same means. He struck the third blow and reached the membrane of his brain. The young man healed this too by the same means. Then he struck the fourth blow and cut out the brain, so that Míach died; and Dían Cécht said that no physician could heal him of that blow.

After that, Míach was buried by Dían Cécht, and three hundred and sixty-five herbs grew through the grave, corresponding to the number of his joints and sinews. Then Airmed spread her cloak and uprooted those herbs according to their properties. Dían Cécht came to her and mixed the herbs, so that no one knows their proper healing qualities unless the Holy Spirit taught them afterwards. And Dían Cécht said, 'Though Míach no longer lives, Airmed shall remain.'

Although this is not strictly speaking a case of resurrection, it certainly represents a symbolic resurrection, while at the same time referring

obliquely to excarnation, through the identification of the herbs with the “joints and sinews” of Miach.

## RESURRECTION OF REINCARNATION?

The story of the transformation of Miach’s joints and sinews into three hundred and sixty-five herbs sounds like an oblique way of referring to reincarnation, a belief regarded as heretical by the Catholic Church. The power of saints to resurrect animals was bizarre, but was just another example of the saints’ miraculous powers, as granted to them by God. No humans were resurrected by Celtic saints, but given that Iron Age humans were buried with animals, the animal resurrection stories may suggest that Iron Age Celts believed in reincarnation and the writers of saints’ lives used the animal stories to appeal to their congregation in a way that steered well clear of heresy. As we’ll see, after the Reformation in the 16th century, fairies came to be associated with reincarnation, first in Scotland and later in Cornwall.



## CHAPTER 6

### *The Folklore of the Celtic Countries from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century (1) The Fairies, Ghosts and Supernatural Dogs of Cornwall and Devon*

#### DEVON AND CORNWALL AS A SINGLE UNIT

In the Roman period Devon and Cornwall were both part of the territory of the Dumnonii, with their tribal capital at Exeter in Devon, and after the departure of the Romans, both were part of the kingdom of Dumnonia. By the late 8th or early 9th century, Devon was under the control of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex, and by the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066, large parts of Cornwall were under English control. Even until the 19th century, Devon and Cornwall were both part of the diocese of Exeter. It is clear that a Celtic language was spoken in Devon and Cornwall when the Romans came in the 1st century AD; this language did not survive in Devon except for some place names in Devon north of Dartmoor, whereas Cornish was widely spoken in Cornwall until the middle of the 16th century.

#### THE END OF THE KINGDOM OF DUMNONIA

Devon became part of the kingdom of Wessex by the 8th or early 9th century, but

Cornwall remained an independent kingdom until the later 9th or 10th century. The *Annales Cambriae* ("Annals of Wales") record that a king of Dumnonia called Dumgarth (also known as Doniert) drowned in the sea

around 875. King Doniert's Stone and its companion cross-shaft stand in an enclosure on the south side of the road from St Cleer to Redgate, and are the only surviving examples of 9th century stone crosses in Cornwall. They overlook the River Fowey, and the site is thought to mark the line of an ancient ridgeway which ran over the moors. The northern cross, termed the "Doniert Stone" is 4 feet 6 inches high with panels of interlace decoration on three sides and an inscription in lower case cursive script on the east face doniert rogavit pro anima ("Doniert ordered [this cross] for [the good of] his soul")<sup>1</sup>. Three miles from the Doniert Stone is Liskeard, first recorded in 1010 as *lis Cerruyt*, probably "Court of Kerwyd", implying that there was a Dumnonian court there<sup>2</sup>.

Launceston in the east of Cornwall close to the border with Devon came under Saxon control when a monastery was established at Lanstefanton in 930; the monks were entrusted with a royal mint between 976-1160<sup>3</sup>. We also know from King Alfred's will that Alfred owned land at Stratton in northeast Cornwall, close to the Devon border. Sometime in the 9th century a bishop called Kenstec, possibly based in Bodmin, professed obedience to the Archbishop of Canterbury.

St Germans lies to the west of Plymouth in Devon, and a church may have been founded there in 430 as the result of a visit by St. Germanus of Auxerre. It became a cathedral in 936 but the bishopric moved to Crediton and Exeter in 1042<sup>4</sup>. St. Germanus was venerated at St Germans by the mid 10th century: a stray leaf of that date contains the liturgical material proper for the mass on his feast-day (July 31). The material calls him a confessor and bishop, states that his relics lay at Lannaled (meaning St Germans), and envisages people visiting his relics. It alleges that he was sent by Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) from Rome to be the "lamp and support of Cornwall", that he flourished at Lannaled, and that he "destroyed the shadows of infidelity, concluding with a reference to King Vortigern."<sup>5</sup> (Vortigern was the British leader who supposedly invited the Anglo-Saxons to settle in Britain). It is apparent that the writer of the liturgical material

knew something about Germanus's fight against heresy in Britain (Germanus was invited to Britain in the early 5th century to combat a heresy called Pelagianism, and there promoted the cult of St. Alban at Roman Verulamium, now St Albans in Hertfordshire).

## CORNWALL AND DEVON FROM THE NORMAN CONQUEST TO THE REFORMATION

### *St. Petroc of Bodmin*

The monastery of St Petroc at Bodmin was re-established as a foundation of Augustinian canons in the 1120s or 1130s, one of a number of such changes in the southwest at this period whereby former monastic settlements of "secular canons" were converted to priories. At Bodmin a new priory complex was developed on a site a short distance southeast of the earlier monastic site (now St Petroc's church). This may not have occurred immediately: excavations in the mid 1980s uncovered the north-west corner of the aisled priory church and dated it to the late 12th or early 13th century.

The shrine of St Petroc which had previously been kept in the monastery was removed to the priory, representing a considerable asset, in terms of both the popular legitimacy it conferred on the new institution and the offerings it attracted from visitors. The saint's relics are said to have been stolen from the priory within a few decades of its foundation and taken by a monk to his home monastery at St Méen in Brittany; they were restored in 1177, housed in an ivory reliquary (now in St Petroc's church)<sup>6</sup>.

### *St. Piran of Perranporth*

At some point St Piran's oratory at Perranporth had to be abandoned because of the encroaching sands, and was replaced by St Piran's church, some 350m away. It grew from a small church to a collegiate church by the 12th century. By 14th century hundreds of pilgrims visited the church on their way to the shrine of St. James at Compostella in Spain, no doubt attracted by the head of St. Piran, which was kept in a silver casket in the

church. By the 17th century sand was causing major problems to the church, and applications were made to the canons of Exeter Cathedral to remove the church to a secure site. After much opposition this was agreed and in 1795 the last wedding was held there<sup>7</sup>.

St. Piran is the patron saint of tin-miners. His feast day was a traditional holiday for Cornish miners, and parades by tinnerns showing off the saints relics or emblems were an early feature of the day across Cornwall. The Cost Book of Great Work Mine near Breage in southwest Cornwall shows that in the mid 18th century, every man and boy working there was paid an “allowance for Perrantide.”<sup>8</sup>.

### *St. Nectan of Hartland (Devon)*

Hartland in northwest Devon was associated with St. Nectan. His 12th century Life says that he was the eldest and most illustrious of the twenty-four children of Brychan, king of Brycheniog in south Wales. Already a monk, he sailed from south Wales to north Devon, followed by his many relatives. He settled in the dense forests which provided him with solitude. After several years spent in solitude in a beautiful but remote valley, provided with a spring, he helped a swineherd find his pigs and was later rewarded with a present of two cows from his master. These, however, were soon stolen by thieves. Nectan found them, remonstrated with them, tried to convert them to Christianity, but was rewarded for his pains by being beheaded. After his death he carried his head for half a mile to the spring by his hut<sup>9</sup>.

Hartland is quite close to the border with Cornwall, and there are Cornish place-names in the area: *Trellick* in the parish of Hartland (from Cornish *tre-* “farmstead”), and possibly the adjacent parish of *Clovelly* (see Welsh *clawdd* or Cornish *cleath* “earthworks”). Further afield there is *Kelly* (from the Cornish *kelli* “grove”), which is in Devon but near Launceston in Cornwall; *Landkey* near Barnstaple in north Devon (the *lan*, or “church” of St. Kea), and various instances of *Nympton* to the south of Landkey (from Celtic *nemeton*, “sanctuary”)<sup>10</sup>. In 975 King Edgar gave Ælfrere, his

faithful minister; grant of 3 hides (mansae) at Nymed (Woolfin in Down St Mary to the north of Dartmoor)<sup>11</sup> – obviously another site derived from nemeton. Down St Mary is not far from the Roman fort of Nemetostatio, which itself is not far from a village called Nymet Rowland, and another called Nymet Tracey.

## A MEDIEVAL GHOST ON BODMIN MOOR

The earliest tale of the supernatural in Cornwall concerns a ghostly apparition on Bodmin Moor. Robert de Mortain was the half-brother of William the Conqueror and accompanied William in his conquest of England, for which he was made Earl of Cornwall. According to Matthew Paris (1200-1259), a monk at St Albans Abbey, Robert was hunting one day in the woods around Bodmin. During a long chase after a great red stag he became separated from his huntsmen and found himself alone. Riding clear of the trees on the moors above, he was astonished to see a large black goat approaching. As it drew near he saw that it bore on its back William Rufus (King William II, the son of William the Conqueror), black, naked, and pierced through the breast. Robert commanded the goat in the name of the Trinity to tell him what it was he bore, and the goat replied, “I am carrying your king to judgement.”

The goat revealed that he was an evil spirit, sent at the bidding of St. Alban (the patron saint of St Albans Abbey), “who complained to God of him”, to wreak vengeance on him for his oppression of the English Church. It later emerged that at the very hour when he encountered the goat, William Rufus had been slain by the arrow of Walter Tirrell in the New Forest (Hampshire), on August 2, 1100<sup>12</sup>.

## FAIRIES IN CORNWALL

### *Mousehole*

The earliest tales of fairies in Cornwall and Devon were first collected in

the 19th century. William Bottrell writing in the early 1870s, said the people in the west of Cornwall still believed in fairies. “though our country folks never call them by that name” (presumably they called them piskies) Bottrell goes on to tell this story set in Mousehole near Penzance<sup>13</sup>:

A few days since, a woman of Mousehole told me that not long ago troops of small people, no more than a foot and a half high, used—on moonlight nights—to come out of a hole in the cliff, opening onto the beach, Newlyn side of the village, and but a short distance from it. The little people were always dressed very smart; and if anyone came near them they would scamper away into the hole. Mothers often told their children that if they went under cliff by night the small people would carry them away into “Dicky Danjy’s holt.”

Another kind called spriggans, which simply means sprites, are believed to guard treasures buried in cliff and hill castles.

Not long since a tinner of Lelant dreamt, three nights following, that a crock of gold was buried in a particular spot, between large rocks within the castle, on Trecroben hill. The next clear moonlight night he dug up the ground of which he had dreamt. After working two or three hours he came to a flat stone which sounded hollow; whilst digging round its edges, the weather became suddenly dark, the wind roared around the ears, and looking up, when he had made a place for his hands to lift it, he saw hundreds of ugly spriggans coming out from amidst the rocks gathering around and approaching him. The man dropped his pick, ran down the hill and home as fast as he could lay foot to ground; he took to his bed and was unable to leave it for weeks.

### *St Buryan*

Bottrell also tells another story of Cornish fairies, set in St Buryan in the far west of Cornwall, which tells us a great deal about the nature of fairies. One night a farmer called Mr Noy, who lived near Selena Moor, set out for the neighboring inn to order drink for the Harvest Home the next day. He left

the inn and never arrived home. The villagers searched for him for three days and finally found him on Selena Moor, dazed and bewildered. After he recovered, he told them his story. Apparently he had decided to take a short cut across the moor and had got lost. After wandering for miles, he heard lively music, and saw lights and people moving about<sup>14</sup>:

His dogs slunk back, and the horse wasn't willing to go on, so he tied him to a tree, took his course through an orchard towards the lights, and came to a meadow where he saw hundreds of people, some seated at tables eating and drinking with great enjoyment apparently, and others dancing reels to the music of a crowd or tambourine—they are much the same thing—this was played by a damsel dressed in white, who stood on a heaping-stock just beside the house, door, which was only a few paces from him.

The revelers, farther off, were all very smartly decked out, but they seemed to him, at least most of them, to be a set of undersized mortals; yet the forms and tables, with the drinking-vessels on them, were all in proportion to the little people. The dancers moved so fast that he couldn't count the number of those that footed jigs and reels together, it almost made his head giddy only to look at their quick and intricate whirling movements.

He noticed that the damsel who played the music was more like ordinary folks for stature, and he took her to be the master's daughter, as, when one dance was ended, she gave the crowd to a little old fellow that stood near her, entered the house, fetched therefrom a black-jack, went round the tables and filled the cups and tankards that those seated, and others, handed to be replenished. Then, whilst she beat up a new tune for another set of dancers, Mr. Noy thought she cast a side-glance towards him; the music, he said, was so charming and lively that to save his soul he couldn't refrain from going to join the dancers in a three-handed reel, but the girl with a frown and look of alarm, made a

motion with her head for him to withdraw round a corner of the house out of sight.

It turned out that the damsel was Grace Hutchens, who had been “his sweetheart for a long while, until she died, three or four years ago; at least he had mourned her as dead, and she had been buried in Buryan Churchyard as such.” Grace Hutchens had a warning for him:

When Mr. Noy came within a yard or so, turning towards him, she said, “thank the stars, my dear William, that I was on the look-out to stop ye, or you would this minute be changed into the small people’s state like I am,—woe is me.”

Ho was about to kiss her, “Oh, beware!” she exclaimed, “embrace me not, nor touch flower nor fruit; for eating a tempting plum in this enchanted orchard was my undoing. You may think it strange, yet it was all through my love for you that I am come to this.”

“People believed, and so it seemed, that I was found on the moor dead; it was also supposed that I must have dropped there in a trance, as I was subject to it. What was buried for me, however, was only a changeling, or sham body, never mine I should think, for it seems to me that I feel much the same still as when I lived to be your sweetheart.”

Grace explains that she too got lost on Selena Moor, heard music and came to a beautiful garden.

This garden was so surrounded with trees and water—coming in every here and there among them—that, like one ‘piskey-led,’ all her endeavours to find a way out of it were in vain. The music, too, seemed very near at times, but she could see nobody. Feeling weary and athirst, she plucked a plum, that looked like gold in the clear star-light; her lips no sooner closed on the fruit than it dissolved to bitter water which made her sick and faint. She then fell on the ground in a fit, and remained insensible, she couldn’t say how long, ere she awoke to find



herself surrounded by hundreds of small people, who made great rejoicing to get her amongst them, as they very much wanted a tidy girl who knew how to bake and brew, one that would keep their habitation decent, nurse the changed-children, that wern't so strongly made as they used to be, for want of more beef and good malt liquor, so they said.

At first she felt like one entranced and hardly knew how to 'find herself' in such strange company; even then, after many years' experience, their mode of life seemed somewhat unnatural to her, for all among them is mere illusion or acting and sham. They have no hearts, she believed, and but little sense or feeling; what serves them, in a way, as such, is merely the remembrance of whatever pleased them when they lived as mortals,—may be thousands of years ago.

Mr Noy asked if there were children among the fairies, apart from changelings:

“Very few indeed,” she replied, “though they are fond of babies, and make great rejoicing when one happens to be born amongst them; and then every little man, however old, is proud to be thought the father. For you must remember they are not of our religion,” said she, in answer to his surprised look, “but star-worshippers. They don't always live together like Christians and turtle-doves; considering their long existence such constancy would be tiresome for them, anyhow the small tribe seem to think so. And the old withered ‘kiskeyes’ of men that one can almost see through, like puffs of smoke, are vainer than the young ones. May the Powers deliver them from their weakly frames! And indeed they often long for the time when they will be altogether dissolved in air, and so end their wearisome state of existence without an object or hope.”

Those who spoke to Mr Noy also had other information about the fairies:

It was said, too, that those who take animal forms get smaller and

smaller with every change, till they are finally lost in the earth as muryans (ants), and that they passed winter, for the most part, in underground habitations, entered from cleves or earns. And it is held that many persons who appear to have died entranced, are not really dead, but changed into the fairy state.

The recovered gentleman farther informed them that he had remarked amongst the small folks, many who bore a sort of family-likeness to people he knew, and he had no doubt but some of them were changelings of recent date, and others their forefathers who died in days of yore, when they were not good enow to be admitted into heaven, nor so wicked as to be doomed to the worst of all places. Over a while, it is supposed they cease to exist as living beings, for which reason fewer of them are now beheld than were seen in old times.

Some 2.5 kilometres southeast of St Buryan is Tregiffian Burial Chamber. a large Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age entrance grave. “The monument was partly excavated by W. C. Borlase in 1871. Borlase uncovered ashes and bone fragments above and below a fallen capstone near the entrance as well as a flint flake above the stone. Under another slab was a small pit lined with sand and shell and filled with bone and ashes. Further excavations were carried in 1967-8 and 1972. These indicated that there may have been two phases to construction. During the first phase the mound was surrounded by a circular kerb of stones but during the second phase these were moved to form an irregular plan in front of the chamber entrance. In addition, a second pit was found containing an intact collared urn (Early Bronze Age) which held a cremation.”<sup>15</sup>. This, of course, is just the sort of place where the fairies might have lived.

### *Woon Gumpus Common, Pendeen*

The Gump, or Woon Gumpus Common, near Pendeen in the far west of Cornwall, was also a place where fairies lived. According to Blight, writing in 1861, an old man, not long “passed away” was crossing the common

when he encountered a crowd of fairies<sup>16</sup>:

Scores of them were here assembled, holding a fair. A band of musicians was at that moment taking the most prominent part in the proceedings; lustily they blew the pipes and tuned their instruments, producing melodious sounds that no mortal could imitate. There were stalls beautifully and temptingly laid out, and graceful arches and garlands were woven with the flowers that the tract afforded ... The old man's curiosity was excited, and he wished to approach yet nearer. So he lay down and dragged himself cautiously towards them, watching their gambols and listening to the music, with which he could find no fault, although leader of the village choir. In the mean time the fairies were continually increasing in number ; but they were not seen until they alighted on the spot. Some dropped from the wing of a bat as it dashed along; and other winged creatures of the night brought their riders to the fair. But the gems and wonderful little articles which glistened on the stalls chiefly attracted attention; they were marvellously made. The old man had a longing desire to possess some, so he threw his hat amongst the company, and made a dash at the coveted treasures; but when he took up his hat nothing was to be seen on the spot but a few snails creeping over the moist grass, and the gossamer threads be-spangled with dew-drops.

Close to Woon Gumpus Common is Chun Castle, a multivallate Iron Age hillfort and iron working site situated on a hill summit at 709 feet above sea level. It is roughly circular with outer and inner walls (now 5.5 feet and 3-4 feet high respectively), each with an external ditch. The entrance is on the west overlooking the Neolithic tomb called Chun Quoit. The interior was divided into a ring of buildings around an open space but very little of the walls remains. The site was excavated in 1895 by J.B. Cornish, again in 1925 by E.T. Leeds and finally in 1927 and 1930, again by Leeds. The 1925 excavation revealed a large furnace on the north side of the enclosure, a

well 12 feet deep which had been cleared out some 25 years previously, a house of elliptical form, east of the well and another in the southeast quarter, of two chambers. Finds included pottery, muller, sling stones, flint chips, 3 spindle whorls, a portion of a shale bracelet, iron and tin slag<sup>17</sup>.

## PIXIES AND PISKIES

### *Sheepstor (Devon)*

In the west of England, as I said earlier, fairies were often referred to as pixies (Devon) or piskies (Cornwall). Sheepstor, a village in the west of Dartmoor in Devon, is named after the Sheeps Tor, a prominent outcrop about half a mile northeast of the village and a favourite haunt of pixies<sup>18</sup>:

The cavity which is said to be their favourite haunt is called the Pixies' house, and is formed by two rocks resting in a slanting position against the vertical side of the tor. Mrs. Bray informs us that the peasantry who venture to visit it still drop a pin as an offering to the pixy, and to this day it is considered a critical place for children to enter after sunset. The pixies are described as a race "invisibly small ; " yet, in the vulgar belief, they may be heard on dark nights riding the horses of the neighbouring farmers, and " pouncing their cider" within this cavern. According to Polwhele, the Pixies' house was selected as a hiding-place by one of the Elford family, who here successfully concealed himself from Cromwell's troopers, and employed his leisure time in painting on the walls.

Not far from Sheepstor is Dewerstone Hill, the site of two enclosures. The outer enclosure is potentially Neolithic, while the inner is probably of Bronze Age date. The stone-built double wall of the outer enclosure is poorly preserved with an average height of 2 feet, and given its loose composition is unlikely to have stood higher than 5 feet. The inner and outer walls now have average widths of 13 feet and 11 feet respectively. Five probable or possible entrances through the double wall were identified;

the existence of so many may support the hypothesis that the enclosure is of Neolithic date (Neolithic causewayed enclosures have several entrances). The inner enclosure is earth and stone built, rectangular in form, with dimensions of 280 feet north-south by 190 feet east-west, enclosing an area of one acre. Its southern end abuts the granite outcrop sometimes called The Dewerstone. The enclosure wall stands 20 inches high on average and has surviving facings of earthfast orthostats in places. There are three possible entrances of which one on the northern side, some 33 feet from the northeast corner appears the most likely to be original. The form of the enclosure suggests a later Bronze Age date<sup>19</sup>.

Robert Hunt, writing in 1865, says:<sup>20</sup>

The appearance of the pixies of Dartmoor is said to resemble that of a bale or bundle of rags. In this shape they decoy children to their unreal pleasure. A woman, on the northern borders of the moor, was returning home late on a dark evening, accompanied by two children, and carrying a third in her arms, when, on arriving at her own door, she found one missing. Her neighbours, with lanthorns, immediately set out in quest of the lost child ; whom they found sitting under a large oak-tree, well known to be a favourite haunt of the pixies. He declared that he had been led away by two large bundles of rags, which had remained with him until the lights appeared, when they immediately vanished.

### *Challacombe (Devon)*

Challacombe in Devon is on the edge of Exmoor, and outside the village is a wild combe known as Pixy Rocks<sup>21</sup>:

Among the crags jutting here and there from the steep walls of this glen the Pixies dwelt in days gone by — perhaps the very Pixies who haunted Bratton Down not so very long since, and whose machinations could only be defeated by the ‘pixy-led ‘ traveller turning his glove inside out.

Not far from Challacombe, at North Molton, there is a barrow cemetery

known as “Five Barrows”, which actually consists of nine barrows. The barrows are clearly visible on aerial photographs of Five Barrows Hill. Barrows 2-8 appear to be surrounded by narrow ditches, visible as cropmark areas of lush growth. In addition, a possible tenth barrow is visible on aerial photographs in the north of the group<sup>22</sup>. There are also three Bronze Age barrows on Bratton Down which may well have been frequented by pixies.

### *Treonike (Cornwall)*

Treonike (now Trefronick) is a small hamlet in the parish of St Allen near Perranporth in Cornwall, which has a story of a boy abducted by piskies, first recorded in 1865. One evening the boy was gathering flowers in a field near a wood<sup>23</sup>:

The child was charmed by hearing some beautiful music, which he at first mistook for the song of birds ; but, being a sharp boy, he was not long deceived, and he went towards the wood to ascertain from whence the melodious sounds came. When he reached the verge of the wood, the music was of so exquisite a character, that he was compelled to follow the sound, which appeared to travel before him. Lured in this way, the boy penetrated to the dark centre of the grove, and here, meeting with some difficulties, owing to the thick growth of underwood, he paused and began to think of returning. The music, however, became more ravishing than before, and some invisible being appeared to crush down all the low and tangled plants, thus forming for him a passage, over which he passed without any difficulty. At length he found himself on the edge of a small lake, and, greatly to his astonishment, the darkness of night was around him, but the heavens were thick with stars. The music ceased, and, wearied with his wanderings, the boy fell asleep on a bed of ferns. He related, on his restoration to his parents, that he was taken by a beautiful lady through palaces of the most gorgeous description. Pillars of glass supported

arches which glistened with every colour, and these were hung with crystals far exceeding anything which were ever seen in the caverns of a Cornish mine. It is, however, stated that many days passed away before the child was found by his friends, and that at length he was discovered, one lovely morning, sleeping on the bed of ferns, on which he was supposed to have fallen asleep on the first adventurous evening.

### *Polperro (Cornwall)*

Polperro is a coastal village in southeast Cornwall, and Jonathan Couch, in *The History of Polperro*, gives this description of piskies<sup>24</sup>:

Our piskies are little beings standing mid-way between the purely spiritual and the material, suffering a few, at least, of the ills incident to humanity. They have the power of making themselves seen, heard, and felt. They interest themselves in man's affairs; now doing him a good turn, anon taking offence at a trifle, and leading him into all manner of mischief ...

Their form of government is monarchical, as frequent mention is made of "the King of the piskies." We have a few stories of pisky changelings, the only proof of whose parentage is that "they didn't goodey," (thrive). It would seem that fairy children of some age are entrusted to mortal care for a time, and again re-called to pisky-land. People are occasionally kidnapped by the little folk; hence an old nursery-rhyme saith—

See saw; Margery Daw  
Sold her bed and lay upon straw;  
Sold her straw and lay upon hay,  
Piskies came and carr'd her away.

Only two piskies, says Couch, are known by name, and are addressed in the following rhyme:

Jack o' the lantern! Joan the wad,

Who tickled the maid and made her mad;  
Light me home, the weather's bad.

Piskies liked to play tricks on people, as Couch demonstrated in these stories<sup>25</sup>:

A Polperro lad meeting them one night as he was going on an errand heard them say in chorus, "I'm for Portallow Green" (a place in the neighbourhood). Repeating the cry after them, "quick as thought he found himself there surrounded by a throng of laughing piskies." The next place they visited was Seaton Beach, between Polperro and Plymouth; the third and last cry was "I'm for the King of France's cellar." Again he decided on joining them, dropped the bundle he was carrying on the sands, and "immediately found himself in a spacious cellar, engaged with his mysterious companions in tasting the richest wines." Afterwards they strolled through the palace, where in a room he saw all the preparations made for a feast, and could not resist the temptation of pocketing one of the rich silver goblets from the table. The signal for their return was soon given, and once more he found himself on Seaton Beach, where he had just time to pick up his bundle before he was whisked home. All these voyages were made in the short space of five minutes. When on his return he told his adventures they were listened to with incredulity until he produced the goblet, which proved the truth of his tale. After having been kept for generations this trophy has disappeared. "These little creatures seem sometimes," Mr. Couch says, "to have delighted in mischief for its own sake. Old Robin Hicks, who formerly lived in a house at 'Quay Head' (Polperro), has more than once, on stormy winter nights, been alarmed at his supper by a voice sharp and shrill 'Robin! Robin! your boat is adrift.' Loud was the laughter and the tacking of hands (clapping) when they succeeded in luring Robin as far as the quay, where the boat was lying safely at its moorings."



Another of his legends is about a fisherman of his district, John Taprail, long since dead, who was, on a frosty night, aroused from his sleep by a voice which called to him that his boat was in danger. He went down to the beach to find that some person” had played a practical joke on him. As he was returning he saw a group of piskies sitting in a semicircle under a much larger boat belonging to one of his neighbours. They were dividing a heap of money between them by throwing a piece of gold alternately into each of the hats which lay before them. John was covetous, and forgot that piskies hate to be spied upon; so he crept up and pushed his hat slyly in with the others. When the pile was getting low he tried to get off with his booty without their detecting the fraud. He had got some distance before the cheat was discovered; then they pursued him in such hot haste that he only escaped with his treasure by leaving his coat-tails in their hands.

According to Miss M.A. Courtney, it was believed in Cornwall at the beginning of the 19th century that unbaptized children, when they died, turned into piskies<sup>26</sup>:

they gradually went through many transformations at each change, getting smaller until at last they became “Meryons” (ants) and finally disappeared. Another tradition is that they were Druids, who, because they would not believe in Christ, were for their sins condemned to change first into piskies, gradually getting smaller, they too, as ants, at last are lost.

## HELL HOUNDS

### *The Wisht Hounds of Dartmoor (Devon) and the Wild Hunt*

Dogs played an important part in funerary rituals in the Iron Age, so it is no surprise that supernatural dogs should figure in British folklore. Wistman’s Wood is one of only three remote high-altitude oakwoods on Dartmoor in Devon. It lies at an altitude of 1245–1345 feet in the valley of the West Dart

River near Two Bridges, and is associated with the Wild Hunt<sup>27</sup>:

According to a writer in the Quarterly Review, of July, 1836, the wild huntsman still lingers in Devonshire. He says, “the spectre pack which hunts over Dartmoor is called the ‘wish hounds,’ and the black ‘master’ who follows the chase is no doubt the same who has left his mark on Wistman’s Wood,” a neighbouring forest of dwarf oaks.

Dewerstone Rock is a great mass of rock looming above the River Plym on the southwest edge of Dartmoor. This rock is said to be home to the Black Huntsman himself, known in this location as Dewer, and thought to be an incarnation of the Devil. An early mention of the Dewerstone is found in Notes and Queries Issue 61 (1850)<sup>28</sup>:

The Dewerstone is a lofty mass of rock rising above the bed of the Plym, on the southern edge of Dartmoor. During a deep snow, the traces of a naked human foot and of a cloven hoof were found ascending to the highest point. The valley below is haunted by a black headless dog.

Murray’s Hand-book for Travellers in Devon and Cornwall (1851), elaborates further on this and claims<sup>29</sup>

on stormy winter nights the peasant has heard the “whist hounds” sweeping through the rocky valley, with cry of dogs, winding of horns and “hoofs thick – beating on the hollow hill.” Their unearthly “master” has been sometimes visible – a tall swart figure with a hunting pole.

As well as packs of hounds, there are also reports of individual spectral hounds. Here is a report published by Sarah Hewett in 1900 of a man who encountered a demonic hound while walking on Roborough Down in the south of Dartmoor<sup>30</sup>:

suddenly there appeared close to his right side an enormous dog, neither mastiff or bloodhound, but what seemed to him to be a

Newfoundland of immense size. Dogs were always fond of him, and he of them, so he took no heed of this (to him) lovely canine specimen. Presently he spoke to him. “Well, doggie, what a beauty you are : how far are you going?” at the same time lifting his hand to pat him. Great was the man’s astonishment to find no resisting substance, though the form was certainly there, for his hand passed right through the seeming body of the animal. “Hulloh ! what’s this?” said the bewildered traveller. As he spoke the great glassy eyes gazed at him ; then the beast yawned, and from his throat issued a stream of sulphurous breath. Well, thought the man, I am in for it now ! I’ll trudge on as fast as legs can carry me, without letting this queer customer think I am afraid of him. With heart beating madly and feet actually flying over the stony way, he hurried down the hill, the dog never for a moment leaving him, or slackening his speed. They soon reached a crossway, not far from the fortifications. When, suddenly the man was startled by a loud report, followed by a blinding flash, as of lightning, which struck him senseless to the ground. At daybreak, he was found by the driver of the mail-cart, lying in the ditch at the roadside in an unconscious state.

### *St Germans (Cornwall) and Dando’s Dogs*

The story of Dando and the Devil, as reported by Robert Hunt in 1865, is associated with St Germans in southeast Cornwall, once dedicated to St. Germanus, and also involves diabolical hounds<sup>31</sup>.

In the neighbourhood of the lovely village of St Germans formerly lived a priest connected with the old priory church of this parish, whose life does not appear to have been quite consistent with his vows. He lived the life of the traditional “jolly friar.” He ate and drank of the best the land could give him, or money buy ; and it is said that his indulgences extended far beyond the ordinary limits of good living. The priest Dando was, notwithstanding all his vices, a man liked by the people. He was good-natured, and therefore blind to many of their sins.

Indeed, he threw a cloak over his own iniquities, which was inscribed “charity,” and he freely forgave all those who came to his confessional ...

The sinful priest was a capital huntsman, and scoured the country far and near in pursuit of game, which was in those days abundant and varied, over this well-wooded district. Dando, in the eagerness of the chase, paid no regard to any kind of property. Many a corn-field has been trampled down, and many a cottage garden destroyed by the horses and dogs which this impetuous hunter would lead unthinkingly over them. Curses deep, though not loud, would follow the old man, as even those who suffered by his excesses were still in fear of his priestly power.

Eventually Dando’s sins caught up with him:

One Sabbath morning, Dando and his riotous rout were hunting over the Earth estate ; game was plenty, and sport first-rate. Exhausted with a long and eager run, Dando called for drink. He had already exhausted the flasks of the attendant hunters. “Drink, I say ; give me drink,” he cried. “Whence can we get it?” asked one of the gang. “Go to hell for it, if you can’t get it on Earth,” said the priest, with a bitter laugh at his own joke on the Earth estate. At the moment, a dashing hunter, who had mingled with the throng unobserved, came forward, and presented a richly-mounted flask to Dando, saying, “Here is some choice liquor distilled in the establishment you speak of. It will warm and revive you, I’ll warrant. Drink deep, friend, drink.” Dando drank deep; the flask appeared to cling to his lips. The strange hunter looked on with a rejoicing yet malignant expression, a wicked smile playing over an otherwise tranquil face.

By and by Dando fetched a deep sigh, and removed the flask, exclaiming, “By hell! that was a drink indeed. Do the gods drink such nectar?” “Devils do,” said the hunter. “An they do, I wish I were one,”

said Dando, who now rocked to and fro in a state of thorough intoxication; “methinks the drink is very like” The impious expression died upon his lips. Looking round with a half-idiotic stare, Dando saw that his new friend had appropriated several head of game. Notwithstanding his stupid intoxication, his selfishness asserted its power, and he seized the game, exclaiming, in a guttural, half-smothered voice, “None of these are thine.” “What I catch I keep,” said the hunter. “By all the devils they ‘re mine,” stammered Dando. The hunter quietly bowed. Dando’s wrath burst at once into a burning flame, uncontrolled by reason. He rolled himself off his horse, and rushed, staggering as he went, at the steed of his unknown friend, uttering most frightful oaths and curses. The strange hunter’s horse was a splendid creature, black as night, and its eyes gleamed like the brightest stars with unnatural lustre. The horse was turned adroitly aside, and Dando fell to the earth with much force. The fall appeared to add to his fury, and he roared with rage. Aided by his attendants, he was speedily on his legs, and again at the side of the hunter, who shook with laughter, shaking the game in derision, and quietly uttering, “They ‘re mine.” “I’ll go to hell after them, but I’ll get them from thee,” shouted Dando. “So thou shalt,” said the hunter; and seizing Dando by the collar, he lifted him from the ground, and placed him, as though he were a child, before him on the horse. With a dash, the horse passed down the hill, its hoofs striking fire at every tread, and the dogs, barking furiously, followed impetuously. These strange riders reached the banks of the Lynher, and with a terrific leap, the horse and its riders, followed by the hounds, went out far in its waters, disappearing at length in a blaze of fire, which caused the stream to boil for a moment, and then the waters flowed on as tranquilly as ever over the doomed priest.

Hunt then adds another version of the story<sup>32</sup>:

Mr T. Q. Couch, in his “Folk Lore of a Cornish Village,” tells the story in a somewhat different form:

A poor herdsman was journeying homeward across the moors one windy night, when he heard at a distance among the Tors the baying of hounds, which he soon recognised as the dismal chorus of the dandy-dogs. It was three or four miles to his house; and very much alarmed, he hurried onward as fast as the treacherous nature of the soil and the uncertainty of the path would allow ; but, alas! the melancholy yelping of the hounds, and the dismal holloa of the hunter came nearer and nearer. After a considerable run, they had so gained upon him, that on looking back, oh horror ! he could distinctly see hunter and dogs. The former was terrible to look at, and had the usual complement of saucer-eyes, horns, and tail, accorded by common consent to the legendary devil. He was black, of course, and carried in his hand a long hunting-pole. The dogs, a numerous pack, blackened the small patch of moor that was visible; each snorting fire, and uttering a yelp of indescribably frightful tone. No cottage, rock, or tree was near to give the herdsman shelter, and nothing apparently remained to him but to abandon himself to their fury, when a happy thought suddenly flashed upon him and suggested a resource. Just as they were about to rush upon him, he fell on his knees in prayer. There was strange power in the holy words he uttered; for immediately, as if resistance had been offered, the hell-hounds stood at bay, howling more dismally than ever, and the hunter shouted, ‘ Bo Shrove,’ which (says my informant) means in the old language, ‘The boy prays,’ at which they all drew off on some other pursuit and disappeared.

## FAIRIES AS THE SOULS OF THE DEAD

### *Three Irish Tales*

In some of these tales, fairies seem to be associated with prehistoric monuments, and are identified as the souls of the dead. This was also the

view in Ireland, in a number of tales collected by Frances Speranza Wilde, the mother of Oscar Wilde, and published in 1887. Here is one such tale, set on the island of Inishark off the coast of Galway in the west of Ireland<sup>33</sup>:

### Kathleen

A young girl from Innis-Sark had a lover, a fine young fellow, who met his death by an accident, to her great grief and sorrow.

One evening at sunset, as she sat by the roadside, crying her eyes out, a beautiful lady came by all in white, and tapped her on the cheek.

“Don’t cry, Kathleen,” she said, “your lover is safe. Just take this ring of herbs and look through it and you will see him. He is with a grand company, and wears a golden circlet on his head and a scarlet sash round his waist.”

So Kathleen took the ring of herbs and looked through it, and there indeed was her lover in the midst of a great company dancing on the hill; and he was very pale, but handsomer than ever, with the gold circlet round his head, as if they had made him a prince.

“Now,” said the lady, “here is a larger ring of herbs. Take it, and whenever you want to see your lover, pluck a leaf from it and burn it; and a great smoke will arise, and you will fall into a trance; and in the trance your lover will carry you away to the fairy rath, and there you may dance all night with him on the greensward. But say no prayer, and make no sign of the cross while the smoke is rising, or your lover will disappear for ever.”

From that time a great change came over Kathleen. She said no prayer, and cared for no priest, and never made the sign of the cross, but every night shut herself up in her room, and burned a leaf of the ring of herbs as she had been told; and when the smoke arose she fell into a deep sleep and knew no more. But in the morning she told her people that, though she seemed to be lying in her bed, she was far away with the fairies on the hill dancing with her lover. And she was very happy in her new life, and wanted no priest nor prayer nor mass any

more, and all the dead were there dancing with the rest, all the people she had known; and they welcomed her and gave her wine to drink in little crystal cups, and told her she must soon come and stay with them and with her lover for evermore.

Now Kathleen's mother was a good, honest, religious woman, and she fretted much over her daughter's strange state, for she knew the girl had been fairy-struck. So she determined to watch; and one night when Kathleen went to her bed as usual all alone by herself in the room, for she would allow no one to be with her, the mother crept up and looked through a chink in the door, and then she saw Kathleen take the round ring of herbs from a secret place in the press and pluck a leaf from it and burn it, on which a great smoke arose and the girl fell on her bed in a deep trance.

Now the mother could no longer keep silence, for she saw there was devil's work in it; and she fell on her knees and prayed aloud--

"O Maia, mother, send the evil spirit away from the child!" And she rushed into the room and made the sign of the cross over the sleeping girl, when immediately Kathleen started up and screamed--

"Mother! mother! the dead are coming for me. They are here! they are here!"

And her features looked like one in a fit. Then the poor mother sent for the priest, who came at once, and threw holy water on the girl, and said prayers over her; and he took the ring of herbs that lay beside her and cursed it for evermore, and instantly it fell to powder and lay like grey ashes on the floor. After this Kathleen grew calmer, and the evil spirit seemed to have left her, but she was too weak to move or to speak, or to utter a prayer, and before the clock struck twelve that night she lay dead.

Here is another tale from Wilde with a similar theme<sup>34</sup>:

A woman was out one day looking after her sheep in the valley, and



coming by a little stream she sat down to rest, when suddenly she seemed to hear the sound of low music, and turning round she beheld at some distance a crowd of people dancing and making merry. And she grew afraid and turned her head away not to see them. Then close by her stood a young man, pale and strange looking, and she beheld him with fear.

“Who are you?” she said at last; “and why do you stand beside me?”

“You ought to know me,” he replied, “for I belong to this place; but make haste now and come away, or evil will befall you.”

Then she stood up and was going away with him, when the crowd left off their dancing and ran towards them crying —

“Come back; come back; come back!”

“Don’t stop; don’t listen,” said the young man, “but follow me.” Then they both began to run, and ran on until they reached a hillock.

“Now we are safe,” said he; “they can’t harm us here.”

And when they stopped he said to her again, “Look me in the face and say if you know me now?”

“No,” she answered, “you are a stranger to me.”

“Look again,” he said, “look me straight in the face — and you will know me.”

Then she looked, and knew instantly that he was a man who had been drowned the year before in the dark winter time, and the waves had never cast up his body on the shore. And she threw up her arms and cried aloud —

“Have you news of my child? Have you seen her, my fair-haired girl, that was stolen from me this day seven years. Will she come back to me never no more?”

“I have seen her,” said the man, “but she will never come back, never more, for she has eaten of the fairy food and must now stay with the spirits under the sea, for she belongs to them body and soul. But go home now, for it is late, and evil is near you and perhaps you will meet

her sooner than you think.”

Then as the woman turned her face homeward, the man disappeared and she saw him no more. When at last she reached the threshold of her house a fear and trembling came on her, and she called to her husband that some one stood in the doorway and she could not pass. And with that she fell down on the threshold on her face, but spake no word more. And when they lifted her up she was dead.

In another tale a man called Hugh is taken “one November Eve” (the Irish harvest festival of Samhain) to a fair where the fairies were dancing and drinking red wine. One of the fairies asked him if he knew the fairies dancing around him<sup>35</sup>:

And when Hugh looked he saw a girl that had died the year before, then another and another of his friends that he knew had died long ago ; and then he saw that all the dancers, men, women, and girls, were the dead in their long, white shrouds. And he tried to escape from them, but could not, for they coiled round him, and danced and laughed and seized his arms, and tried to draw him into the dance, and their laugh seemed to pierce through his brain and kill him. And he fell down before them there, like one faint from sleep, and knew no more till he found himself next morning lying within the old stone circle by the fairy rath on the hill. Still it was all true that he had been with the fairies ; no one could deny it, for his arms were all black with the touch of the hands of the dead, the time they had tried to draw him into the dance ; but not one bit of all the red gold, which the little imp had given him, could he find in his pocket. Not one single golden piece ; it was all gone for evermore.

### *The Souls of the Dead and Purgatory*

This link between fairies and the souls of the dead probably has a number of origins, starting with the concept of Purgatory as an intermediate state between Heaven and Hell. The idea of Purgatory was popularised in the

later Middle Ages by the story of St. Patrick's Purgatory. This emerged in the 12th century with the publication of the *Tractatus de Purgatorio Sancti Patricii* ('Treatise on St Patrick's Purgatory'), written in 1180-84 by a monk who identifies himself as Henry de Saltrey, from the Cistercian abbey at Sawtry in Cambridgeshire. The Tractatus relates the journey of an Irish knight Owein to St Patrick's Purgatory, where he journeys through Purgatory and the Earthly Paradise. Among the most famous versions of the Tractatus are the late 12th century Legend of the Purgatory of St Patrick, written in French by the Anglo-Norman poet Marie de France, and a Middle English version from the 14th century preserved in the Auchinleck manuscript in the National Library of Scotland. There is no indication where St Patrick's Purgatory is, but Gerald of Wales, in his Topography of Ireland (published in 1188), is more specific<sup>36</sup>:

There is a lake in Ulster containing an island divided into two parts. In one of these stands a church of especial sanctity, and it is most agreeable and delightful, as well as beyond measure glorious for the visitations of angels and the multitude of the saints who visibly frequent it. The other part, being covered with rugged crags, is reported to be the resort of devils only, and to be almost always the theatre on which crowds of evil spirits visibly perform their rites. This part of the island contains nine pits, and should any one perchance venture to spend the night in one of them (which has been done, we know, at times, by some rash men), he is immediately seized by the malignant spirits, who so severely torture him during the whole night, inflicting on him such unutterable sufferings by fire and water, and other torments of various kinds, that when morning comes scarcely any spark of life is found left in his wretched body. It is said that any one who has once submitted to these torments as a penance imposed upon him, will not afterwards undergo the pains of hell, unless he commit some sin of a deeper dye. This place is called by the natives the Purgatory of St. Patrick.

Gerald of Wales' 'lake in Ulster' is Lough Derg in County Donegal, northwest Ireland, and most later accounts make it clear there was only one "cave", and that it was an artificial structure built of stone. It appears to have been around 15 feet long, 2 feet wide, and only 3 feet wide<sup>37</sup>.

### *The Army of the Dead*

Another possible source is tales of "armies of the dead". Orderic Vitalis was an English Benedictine monk who was born in Shropshire but spent most of his life in Saint-Evroul in Normandy, which at the time "was struggling for its independence from the two powers that were threatening it: the bishop of Lisieux and the seigneurs of the region, in particular the fearsome lord Robert of Bellême"<sup>38</sup>. Robert of Bellême was "the sworn enemy of the protector of Saint-Evroult, Hugh of Grandmesnil, whom he besieged in Courcy in 1191. It is within this context, in the same year and in the same region, that the apparition of Hellequin's hunt is mentioned"<sup>39</sup>.

Orderic heard the tale from a local priest called Walchelin, who served the church of Bonneval, which belonged to the Abbey of Saint-Aubin in Angers. One night he was returning from a visit to a sick parishioner when he heard the din of a "great army" which he assumed belonged to Robert of Bellême on its way to the siege of Courcy. The priest sought shelter among four medlar trees, ready to defend himself. At that moment there appeared before him a giant man armed with a mace, who ordered him to stay where he was and watch the procession of the "army", which was coming in successive waves. I'll only mention some of the more picturesque groups. In the second group<sup>40</sup>:

Two Ethiopians – black demons – were carrying an enormous tree trunk, on which a wretched man, bound and wailing in pain, was being tortured; a fearful demon, sitting on the trunk, was goading his back and sides with red-hot spurs. Walchelin recognized the poor man: two years earlier, the man had killed the priest Stephen and had died without completing his penance for the crime.

Next came the third group:

a troop of women on horseback, riding on sidesaddles covered with burning nails; the wind unremittingly lifted them several feet from the saddles, then dropped them, painfully, back on to the sharp points; their breasts were pierced with the nails heated in the fire, which caused them to shriek out bewailing their sins. These women, among whom Walchelin recognized several noblewomen, had lived lives of debauchery and ostentation.

As Walchelin watched them pass by he realized this was Hellequin's Army, which apparently had been a folktale for many years. The name Hellequin is Germanic, and can be compared to German Heer ("army") and Old English or Old Frisian *thing* ("assembly of free men")<sup>41</sup>.

## CORNISH INTERPRETATIONS OF FAIRIES

According to William Bottrell, fairies are not Christians but "star-worshippers", and "those who take animal forms get smaller and smaller with every change, till they are finally lost in the earth as *muryans* (ants)" According to M.A. Courtney, unbaptized children, when they died turned into piskies, then gradually became smaller and smaller until they became ants; or piskies were Druids who refused to believe in Christ. Bottrell also implies that fairies were the souls of the dead, a view of fairies which is even more obvious in the Irish tales of Lady Wilde. All this suggests a link between fairies and Celtic pagan beliefs, but whether these beliefs persisted or were encouraged by medieval Catholic priests and/or Protestant clerics is unclear. The fact that the fairies get smaller with every change is intriguing: could this be an oblique reference to the Iron Age practice of excarnation which early Christians, intent on ensuring that the body remained whole, would have found deeply troubling. And the taking of animal form recalls the humans buried with animals in the Iron Age.

## CHAPTER 7

### *The Folklore of the Celtic Countries from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century (2) The Fairies, Water-Horses and Death Omens of Wales*

#### LATER MEDIEVAL WALES AND ITS SAINTS

##### *St. David of St Davids*

St. David is Wales' most celebrated male saint, but little is known of the cult of David before the 11th century. In 999, Danish pirates killed Morgeneu, the bishop of Mynyw (St Davids) – according to Gerald of Wales, this was a “judgement for having been the first bishop since Dewi himself to eat meat”. In 1080 another bishop Abraham was killed by Vikings, and his predecessor Sulien was brought out of retirement. In 1081 Gruffudd ap Cynan, pretender to the kingdom of Gwynedd, landed at Porth Clais near St Davids, and was met by Sulien along with Rhys ap Tewdr, the dispossessed king of Deheubarth. Gruffudd and Rhys accompanied Bishop Sulien the short distance to the church of Mynyw to swear an oath on the relics of St. David. This solemn action was the prelude to a successful military push, which fairly quickly gave Gruffudd and Rhys victory at the battle of Mynydd Carn: a decisive triumph over Trahaearn ap Caradog of Gwynedd, Caradog ap Gruffudd of Glamorgan, and Meilir ap Rhiwallon of Powys, all of whom fell on the battlefield<sup>1</sup>.

In 1090, the bodily remains of David were lost when the shrine was stripped bare in an attack by the Vikings. All that remained were secondary relics: an altar covered with skins and veils, a bell renowned for its miracles, a pastoral staff, “lustrous with glorious miracles”, and a tunic (a type of liturgical vestment) made from cloth of gold<sup>2</sup>. It was around this

time that Rhygyfarch wrote his Life of David.

Gerald of Wales, writing in the early 1190s, mentions another secondary relic of David<sup>3</sup>. Gerald tells how David was busy copying the gospel of St John; when the church bell rang, David jumped up and rushed to church without closing the book or completing the page. When he returned to the scriptorium he found the column which he had already begun completed in gold letters by the work of an angel. David therefore “closed the book and removed it from the sight of human eyes, making no addition whatsoever.”

This is why, even to this day, the inside of the book, which was closed and bound into a volume becomingly adorned with silver and gold, is not shown to human eyes. No one is said to have dared look inside the book or to open its seal since St David’s time almost to the present. But in these recent days some people have presumed to try it ... but grievously and suddenly struck down by heaven’s anger, they were called back from their rash daring. That text, moreover, is called by the inhabitants of this district the Imperfect Gospel, and even to this day it is renowned for its miracles and virtues, and is not undeservedly held in the highest reverence by everyone.

### *St. Cybi and St. Seiriol of Anglesey*

Anglesey’s best known saints are St. Cybi and St. Seiriol, associated with a number of holy wells. The most famous of these are the Clorach wells near Llanerchymedd in the centre of Anglesey. St. Cybi’s monastery was on the west of Anglesey, at Holyhead, and on the east of the island at Penmon was the monastery of St. Seiriol. According to tradition, St. Cybi and St. Seiriol would regularly trek across the island and meet at the well near Llanerchymedd. The story tells us that Seiriol walking westwards in the morning and eastwards in the evening always had his back to the sun and thus never got a tan (regardless of how he spent the rest of his time). Cybi on the other hand always walked towards the sun.

The account has been set in verse by the English poet Matthew Arnold

(1822-1888) and also by the Welsh-language poet Sir John Morris Jones (1864-1929). Here is the first verse of the English version of Morris Jones' poem<sup>4</sup>:

Seiriol the fair and Cybi the tawny  
Met as it is said  
Daily by the well of Clorach  
In the centre of Anglesey

At the point where they met were two strongly flowing wells directly opposite to each other, one on either side of the road. These wells have had a reputation as an important site which is documented back into at least the 18th century and probably long long before that.

### *St. Winefride of Holywell*

As I said earlier, Wales best known female saint is Gwenfrewi, better known as Winefride or Winifred and associated with Holywell in Flintshire, northeast Wales. The first Life of Gwenfrewi was written in the 12th century by a monk from Shrewsbury in Shropshire. According to this and subsequent Lives, Winefride was the only child of noble parents, and a virgin. One Sunday, while her parents were at church, the local ruler Caradog tried to rape her. Escaping, Winefride fled towards Beuno's church; but Prince Caradog caught her on the hillside, and cut off her head. Beuno cursed the unrepentant Caradog, who melted away. In the words of the chronicler<sup>5</sup>:

As she reached the door of the church, he caught her up and struck off her head with his sword, which fell into the church while her body remained outside. Beuno and her mother and father saw what had happened, and Beuno stared into the face of the king and said: "I ask God not to spare you and to respect you as little as you respected this good girl." And in that moment the king melted away into a lake, and was seen no more in this world.



However, Winefride miraculously survived this fatal blow:

Beuno took the girl's head and placed it back with the body, covering the body with his cloak and saying to her mother and father who were mourning for her: "Be quiet for a little while and leave her as she is until the Mass is over." Then Beuno celebrated the sacrifice to God. When the Mass was finished, the girl rose up entirely healed and dried the sweat from her face; God and Beuno healed her. Where her blood fell to earth, a spring was formed, which even today still heals people and animals from their illnesses and injuries.

The spring formed from the girl's blood is St Winefride's well in Holywell, a popular centre of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages, and still a centre of pilgrimage today. Holywell was first mentioned as a place of pilgrimage in 1115, and from 1240 to the dissolution it was part of the possessions of Basingwerk Abbey. Henry V made the pilgrimage in 1415 before his victory at Agincourt, as did Edward IV before Towton Moor in 1461. The future Henry VII, too, is thought to have made a secret visit before winning his crown at Bosworth in 1485.

The present building, set into a hillside, dates from the late 15th century. It was probably built for Margaret Beaufort, Henry VII's mother, to replace an earlier structure, and is richly ornamented on the exterior with a frieze of animals, and the badges of Henry VII and Thomas Stanley (Margaret Beaufort's third husband); the quality of the workmanship suggests that royal masons may have been employed<sup>6</sup>.

### *St. Cadoc of Llancarfan*

St. Cadoc was one of the most important saints of south Wales. Born into the royal families of Gwynllwg and Brycheiniog, he worked miracles even before his birth. Strange lights shone in his parents' house and the cellars were miraculously filled with food. An angel announced his birth and summoned the hermit Meuthi to baptise and teach him. A holy well sprang up for his baptism and afterwards flowed with wine and milk. He grew up

to be a great leader: churches all over South Wales were dedicated to him, and he founded the great monastery of Llancarfan in the Vale of Glamorgan<sup>7</sup>.

But there is a dark side to the story of Cadoc. In many of the stories about Cadoc, he is vengeful and unforgiving in the extreme. He blinded King Rhun of Gwynedd, who had tried to burn one of Cadoc's barns. At his command the earth opened and swallowed Sawyl Benuchel, who had plundered the monastery at Llancarfan, and some soldiers who had demanded food from him with menaces. As a boy Cadoc cursed a peasant and caused him to be burnt alive<sup>8</sup>:

One day, their hearth being cold, the aforesaid presbyter bade his disciple, Cadog, to fetch fire to cook the food. He, obeying his master's command without question, went immediately to a threshing-floor, or winnowing place for corn, where in that hour was a servant of his teacher, Tidus by name, drying oats, and demanded of him firmly that he would give him fire for the master's need. But that boorish rustic, rejecting his petition, refused to give him any, unless he would carry the burning coals in his cloak. He, trusting in the Lord and taking the coals of fire in his garment, brought them to his instructor with clothing unconsumed.

Enraged at this treatment, Cadoc cursed the peasant:

'I beseech thee, God, almighty Father, Maker of heaven and earth, who givest to thy servants on earth the power of treading on scorpions, making poisons harmless, putting demons to flight, giving sight to the blind, cleansing lepers, healing the sick, taming savage sinners, and subduing the impious, receive into thy ears my prayers, that, that rustic may, by the kindling of his own fire-brands, with the threshing-floor and grain be burnt together, and that his threshing-floor may be cursed by God, so that none other after his death may use it for ever, and that his progeny may be subject to other folks ... The supplication finished,

and he looking back, lo, the threshing-floor anathematized by him together with the boorish villein mentioned above is fired and utterly burnt. In that place too where that threshing- or winnowing-floor was situated, a horrid fountain arose after its burning in memory of this divine vengeance, which, causing there a black bog, remains to this day in memory (or record) of that event.

### *St. Illtyd of Llanrhidian*

The church at Llanrhidian on the Gower Peninsula to the south of Swansea was thought to have been first established by St. Rhidian in the 6th century, but the church was later dedicated to St. Illtyd (Illtud), who founded an early monastery at Llantwit Major (Vale of Glamorgan). The church was granted by William de Turberville in about 1167 to the Knights Hospitallers of St. John, by whom the present building was probably begun in the 13th century<sup>9</sup>. In the church is the Leper Stone, an early Christian carved stone of 9th-10th century date, thought to be a representation of the meeting of St. Paul and St. Anthony in the desert<sup>10</sup>.

According to the Annals of Margam Abbey, in 1185 a miraculous event occurred at Llanrhidian<sup>11</sup>:

About the nativity of John the Baptist [June 24] in the country, the name of which is Gower, in a town called Llandridian, on the fifth day of the week, a copious stream of milk instead of water flowed constantly for three hours from a certain well, which the inhabitants call the well of St. Illtyd. Many who were present testified that while they were looking at the milky stream carefully and with astonishment, they also saw among the gravel curds lying about in every direction, and all around the edge of the well, a certain fatty substance floating about, such as is collected from milk, so that butter can be made from it.

### *The Medieval Tale of Elidorus and the Fairies*

The earliest tales of fairies in Wales is from Giraldus Cambrensis, also known as Gerald of Wales. The Welsh-Norman priest and historian stayed

at Swansea Castle in the late 12th century and recorded this tale of a young man lured away by fairies<sup>12</sup>:

A short time before our days, a circumstance worthy of note occurred in these parts, which Elidorus, a priest, most strenuously affirmed had befallen himself. When a youth of twelve years, and learning his letters ... in order to avoid the discipline and frequent stripes inflicted on him by his preceptor, he ran away, and concealed himself under the hollow bank of a river. After fasting in that situation for two days, two little men of pigmy stature appeared to him, saying, “ If you will come with us, we will lead you into a country full of delights and sports.” Assenting and rising up, he followed his guides through a path, at first subterraneous and dark, into a most beautiful country, adorned with rivers and meadows, woods and plains, but obscure, and not illuminated with the full light of the sun. All the days were cloudy, and the nights extremely dark, on account of the absence of the moon and stars. The boy was brought before the king, and introduced to him in the presence of the court; who, having examined him for a long time, delivered him to his son, who was then a boy. These men were of the smallest stature, but very well proportioned in their make; they were all of a fair complexion, with luxuriant hair falling over their shoulders like that of women. They had horses and greyhounds adapted to their size. They neither ate flesh nor fish, but lived on milk diet, made up into messes with saffron. They never took an oath, for they detested nothing so much as lies. As often as they returned from our upper hemisphere, they reprobated our ambition, infidelities, and inconstancies; they had no form of public worship, being strict lovers and reverers, as it seemed, of truth.

Elidorus also learnt a little of the language they spoke:

He had made himself acquainted with the language of that nation, the words of which, in his younger days, he used to recite, which, as the

bishop often had informed me, were very conformable to the Greek idiom. When they asked for water, they said Ydor ydorum, which meant bring water, for Ydor in their language, as well as in the Greek, signifies water ... and Dur also, in the British language, signifies water. When they wanted salt they said, Halgein ydorum, bring salt: salt is called hals in Greek, and Halen in British

This fits in one of the theories about fairies – that they were the original inhabitants of Britain who had literally “gone underground” when later settlers arrived to claim their land.

Elidorus frequently returned to our world, and on one occasion he stole a golden ball as a present for his mother; two “pigmies” pursued him and recovered that ball, but from that time he was unable to find the underground world. This area has a history of miraculous events: in the Middle Ages Llanrhidian on the Gower peninsula was the home of St. Illtyd and St. Illtyd’s well, where milk flowed instead of water for three hours in the late 12th century.

## FAIRIES (TYLWYTH TEG)

### *The “Fair Family”*

In Wales fairies are called Tylwyth Teg (“Fair Family”), or Bendith y Mamau (“Mothers’ Blessing”)<sup>13</sup>.

The fairies were regarded by most peoples as being on the whole dangerous to humanity and thus in need of constant propitiation. However, they could also be helpful to mankind if proper respect were given to them. They were notorious for stealing healthy babies who had been put out in the sunshine while the busy mother took the opportunity to get on with her chores.

In the non-Welsh-speaking region of Pembrokeshire, says Ross<sup>14</sup>, “people who lose their way, especially at night, were said to be pisky-led. Pisky of

course stands for pixie. Other groups of elf-like or fairy beings called *bwbach*, *bwca*, *bwci*, *bwgan* ... are sometimes classified as fairies. *Bwca* also appears as *pwca* (Puck?).”

### *Llyn Cwellyn (Gwynedd)*

There are numerous tales of fairies in 19th century Wales – here is one from Gwynedd, northwest Wales. Llyn Cwellyn (Cwellyn Lake) is in Gwynedd, to the southeast of Caernarfon (the Roman fort of Segontium), and Elias Owen<sup>15</sup> recounts this tale of a fairy wife, taken from Williams’ *Observations on the Snowdon Mountains* (1802):

In a meadow belonging to Ystrad, bounded by the river which falls from Cwellyn Lake, they say the Fairies used to assemble, and dance on fair moon-light-nights. One evening a young man, who was the heir and occupier of this farm, hid himself in a thicket close to the spot where they used to gambol; presently they appeared, and when in their merry mood, out he bounced from his covert and seized one of their females; the rest of the company dispersed themselves, and disappeared in an instant. Disregarding her struggles and screams, he hauled her to his home, where he treated her so very kindly that she became content to live with him as his maid servant; but he could not prevail upon her to tell him her name. Some time after, happening again to see the Fairies upon the same spot, he heard one of them saying, ‘The last time we met here, our sister Penelope was snatched away from us by one of the mortals!’ Rejoiced at knowing the name of his Incognita, he returned home; and as she was very beautiful, and extremely active, he proposed to marry her, which she would not for a long time consent to; at last, however, she complied, but on this condition, ‘That if ever he should strike her with iron, she would leave him, and never return to him again.’ They lived happily for many years together, and he had by her a son, and a daughter; and by her industry and prudent management as a house-wife he became one of the richest men in the country ...

Unfortunately, one day Penelope followed her husband into the field to catch a horse; and he, being in a rage at the animal as he ran away from him, threw at him the bridle that was in his hand, which unluckily fell on poor Penelope. She disappeared in an instant, and he never saw her afterwards, but heard her voice in the window of his room one night after, requesting him to take care of the children, in these words:—

Oh! lest my son should suffer cold,  
Him in his father's coat infold,  
Lest cold should seize my darling fair,  
For her, her mother's robe prepare.

As Elias Owen says, it was widely believed that fairies stole the children of mortals:

It was firmly believed, at one time, in Wales, that the Fairies exchanged their own weakly or deformed offspring for the strong children of mortals. The child supposed to have been left by the Fairies in the cradle, or elsewhere, was commonly called a changeling. This faith was not confined to Wales; it was as common in Ireland, Scotland, and England, as it was in Wales.

There are numerous changeling stories from Wales, and here is one from the 18th century, recounted by Thomas Pennant, which took place in Whitford near Holywell in Flintshire, northeast Wales, dedicated to St. Winefride during the Middle Ages<sup>16</sup>:

Pennant records how a woman who had a peevish child acted to regain from the Fairies her own offspring. His words are:—"Above this is a spreading oak of great antiquity, size, and extent of branches; it has got the name of Fairy Oak. In this very century (the eighteenth) a poor cottager, who lived near the spot, had a child who grew uncommonly peevish; the parents attributed this to the Fairies, and imagined that it was a changeling. They took the child, put it into a cradle, and left it all

night beneath the tree, in hopes that the Tylwyth Têg, or Fairy Family, or the Fairy folk, would restore their own before the morning. When morning came, they found the child perfectly quiet, so went away with it, quite confirmed in their belief.

### *Gorsgoch (Ceredigion)*

Here is another changeling story from Gorsgoch near Lampeter in Ceredigion, west Wales<sup>17</sup>:

There was once a happy family living in a place called Gors Goch. One night, as usual, they went to bed, but they could not sleep a single wink, because of the noise outside the house. At last the master of the house got up, and trembling, enquired ‘What was there, and what was wanted.’ A clear sweet voice answered him thus, ‘We want a warm place where we can tidy the children.’ The door was opened when there entered half full the house of the Tylwyth Têg, and they began forthwith washing their children. And when they had finished, they commenced singing, and the singing was entrancing. The dancing and the singing were both excellent. On going away they left behind them money not a little for the use of the house. And afterwards they came pretty often to the house, and received a hearty welcome in consequence of the large presents which they left behind them on the hob. But at last a sad affair took place which was no less than an exchange of children. The Gors Goch baby was a dumpy child, a sweet, pretty, affectionate little dear, but the child which was left in its stead was a sickly, thin, shapeless, ugly being, which did nothing but cry and eat, and although it ate ravenously like a mastiff, it did not grow. At last the wife of Gors Goch died of a broken heart, and so also did all her children, but the father lived a long life and became a rich man, because his new heir’s family brought him abundance of gold and silver.”

To the north of Gorsgoch is the hillfort of Castell Moeddyn, on the southern side of a rounded hilltop at 886 feet above sea level. It is strongly defended



by a rampart on the north, easily approachable side, but more weakly defended along the steep slopes to the southwest, south and east. On these sides the hill falls steeply away to the Afon (River) Grannell over 70m below<sup>18</sup>. Clearly Castell Moeddyn could easily have been the haunt of fairies.

### *Ruthin (Denbighshire)*

Elias Owen says of the fairies<sup>19</sup>: “The one occupation of the Fairy folk celebrated in song and prose was dancing. Their green rings, circular or ovoidal in form, abounded in all parts of the country, and it was in these circles they were said to dance through the livelong night.” Here is a fairy dance story which took place near Ruthin in northeast Wales<sup>20</sup>:

A man who went to witness a Fairy dance was invited to join them. He did so, and all night long he greatly enjoyed himself. At the break of day the company broke up, and the Fairies took their companion with them. The man found himself in a beautiful hall with everything he could desire at his command, and here he pleasantly passed the time ere he retired to rest. In the morning when he awoke, instead of finding himself on a couch in Fairy Hall, he found himself lying on a heap of fern on the wild mountain side.

Perhaps this fairy dance took place near the Iron Age hillfort of Foel Fenlli. Foel Fenlli is a 9.8ha hillfort on the summit of a mountain peak overlooking the vale of Clwyd. “The fort is rather irregular in shape, roughly 480m east-west by 74-280m. Its eastern end perches on the actual summit and the remainder is draped across the gentle upper western slopes below. It is enclosed by two or three lines of great ramparts and ditches. These run above headlong slopes except on the east. The ramparts would originally have been crowned by elaborate timber-framed breastworks. There was a single west-facing entrance, an elaborate in-turned structure with outworks ... A Bronze Age burial cairn crowns the highest summit.”<sup>21</sup>.

### *Glastonbury Tor (Somerset)*

The king of the fairies was Gwynn ap Nudd, the descendant of the the Romano-British god Nodens, and the 7th century Welsh saint Collen had an encounter with Gwynn on Glastonbury Tor in Somerset, described in the 17th century Buchedd Collen<sup>22</sup>:

“And as he was one day in his cell, he heard two men conversing about Gwyn ab Nudd, and saying that he was king of Annwn and of the Fairies. And Collen put his head out of his cell, and said to them, ‘Hold your tongues quickly, those are but Devils.’--’Hold thou thy tongue,’ said they, ‘thou shalt receive a reproof from him.’ And Collen shut his cell as before.

“And soon after, he heard a knocking at the door of his cell, and some one inquired if he were within. Then said Collen, ‘I am; who is it that asks?’ ‘It is I, a messenger from Gwyn ab Nudd, the king of Annwn, to command thee to come and speak with him on the top of the hill at noon.’

“But Collen did not go. And the next day behold the same messenger came, ordering Collen to go and speak with the king on the top of the hill at noon.

“But Collen did not go. And the third day behold the same messenger came, ordering Collen to go and speak with the king on the top of the hill at noon. ‘And if thou dost not go, Collen, thou wilt be the worst for it.’

“Then Collen, being afraid, arose, and prepared some holy water, and put it in a flask at his side, and went to the top of the hill. And when he came there, he saw the fairest castle he had ever beheld, and around it the best appointed troops, and numbers of minstrels, and every kind of music of voice and string, and steeds with youths upon them the comeliest in the world, and maidens of elegant aspect, sprightly, light of foot, of graceful apparel, and in the bloom of youth and every magnificence becoming the court of a puissant sovereign. And he

beheld a courteous man on the top of the castle, who bade him enter, saying that the king was waiting for him to come to meat. And Collen went into the castle, and when he came there, the king was sitting in a golden chair. And he welcomed Collen honourably and desired him to eat, assuring him that, besides what he saw, he should have the most luxurious of every dainty and delicacy that the mind could desire, and should be supplied with every drink and liquor that his heart could wish; and that there should be in readiness for him every luxury of courtesy and service, of banquet and of honourable entertainment, of rank and of presents: and every respect and welcome due to a man of his wisdom

Collen conversed with the fairy king for a time; then he took out his flask and threw the holy water on their heads, “whereupon they vanished from his sight, so that there was neither castle, nor troops, nor men, nor maidens, nor music, nor song, nor steeds, nor youths, nor banquet, nor the appearance of any thing whatever, but the green hillocks.”

Glastonbury Tor was a monastic site in the Middle Ages, but it also has a much longer history. There are earthworks on the Tor, which were thought to be medieval strip lynchets. However, the top of the Tor is too steep for effective cultivation, and it is possible that the terraces are Neolithic modifications of the natural Tor. The Tor is visible from around the landscape and would have been an important landmark, so it is not unlikely it would have been modified by the people living in the surrounding area. Later on the lower terraces were cultivated and the upper ones left due to their unsuitability<sup>23</sup>.

## WATER-HORSES

### *Glynneath (Neath)*

According to Marie Trevelyan, the “Ceffyl-dwr, or water-horse of Wales, was described as a beautiful but small creature, who, after tempting the

unwary traveller to mount him, soared over river and mountain, then suddenly melted into thin air or mist, and threw his rider to destruction.”

About fifty years ago, says Trevelyan, people living in the rural districts firmly believed in the water-horse. At Glynneath in south Wales, “a man, tired out after a long journey, lingered to rest in a shady nook.”<sup>24</sup>:

A water-horse slowly came up from under the foaming cascade, shook the spray from its snow-white mane, and ascended the slope upon which the tired man rested. By-and-by the animal neighed, then snorted, and tossed its head proudly in the sunlight. The weary man was tempted to mount the fine creature, and this he found was remarkably easy of accomplishment. Soon he was safely astride the noble horse. Saddle and bridle he had not, but the grateful man felt the white mane of the animal to be an excellent substitute. He had not long mounted before he observed that the horse was going at an unusual speed. Moreover, he noticed that the horse’s hoofs did not appear to touch the ground. For a time the astonished rider enjoyed the rapid rate at which the horse conveyed him, but after a while he became slightly alarmed. Wonder took the place of enjoyment, and soon terror supplanted both, as, up hill and down dale, the horse went with the speed of lightning. It was moonrise when he found himself thrown on the slope of a hill.

The water-horse disappeared, and the man found himself in Llanddwei Brefi, Ceredigion, west Wales, a long way from Glynneath. Close to Glynneath is Llyn Fawr, where one of the most significant prehistoric metalwork hoards in Wales, containing cauldrons, weaponry and other metalwork from the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages, was discovered when the lake was partly drained in 1911-1913 for the construction of a new reservoir<sup>25</sup>.

### *Brecon (Powys)*

Here is another water-horse story from the River Honddu in the Brecon Beacons, southeast Wales<sup>26</sup>:

Near the town of Brecon the remains of a Roman camp are still to be seen. It is supposed to have been formed by Ostorius Scapula, on the site of the British camp “Caer Bannau,” from which the local Roman station was called ‘Bannium.’ This camp stands on the north bank of the River Honddu. About a century ago a weary man was lured by a small grey water-horse from the camp to the edge of the river. Opportunity was too inviting to be lost, so the man mounted the horse, and in a very short space of time was set down on the banks of the Towy, not far from Carmarthen. Three days later the man was again lured by the small grey horse, and carried back to the Honddu—but, as the narrator said, “ in a worse state than when he left, for the Ceffyl-dwr had dragged him through mire and water, through brambles and briars, until he was scarcely knowable.”

The Roman camp that Owen mentions is today known as Brecon Gaer Roman fort, and is on the north bank of the Usk (the Honddu is a tributary of the Usk).

## HELL HOUNDS

### *Hell Hounds in the Mabinogion*

Supernatural dogs in Welsh are Cwn Annwn, and according to Elias Owen<sup>27</sup>, the words Cwn Annwn

are variously translated as Dogs of Hell, Dogs of Elfinland. In some parts of Wales they are called Cwn Wybir, Dogs of the Sky, and in other places Cwn Bendith Y Mamau. We have seen that “Bendith y Mamau” is a name given to the Fairies, and in this way these dogs become Fairy Dogs.

A description of these Fairy dogs is given in Y Brython, vol. iii p. 22. Briefly stated it is as follows:—Cwn Bendith y Mamau were a pack of small hounds, headed by a large dog. Their howl was something terrible to listen to, and it foretold death. At their approach all other

dogs ceased barking, and fled before them in terror, taking refuge in their kennels. The birds of the air stopped singing in the groves when they heard their cry, and even the owl was silent when they were near. The laugh of the young, and the talk at the fireside were hushed when the dreadful howl of these Hell hounds was heard, and pale and trembling with fear the inmates crowded together for mutual protection. And what was worse than all, these dogs often foretold a death in some particular family in the neighbourhood where they appeared, and should a member of this family be in a public-house, or other place of amusement, his fright would be so great that he could not move, believing that already had death seized upon some one in his house.

As Owen points out, these dogs were first described in the First Branch of the *Mabinogion* (late 11th-12th century)<sup>28</sup>:

It is there stated that Pwyll, prince of Dyved, went out to hunt, and:—

“He sounded his horn and began to enter upon the chase, following his dogs and separating from his companions. And, as he was listening to the cry of his pack, he could distinctly hear the cry of another pack, different from that of his own, and which was coming in an opposite direction. He could also discern an opening in the wood towards a level plain; and as his pack was entering the skirt of the opening, he perceived a stag before the other pack, and about the middle of the glade the pack in the rear coming up and throwing the stag on the ground; upon this he fixed his attention on the colour of the pack without recollecting to look at the stag; and, of all the hounds in the world he had ever seen, he never saw any like them in colour. Their colour was a shining clear white, with red ears; and the whiteness of the dogs, and the redness of their ears, were equally conspicuous.”

We are informed that these dogs belonged to Arawn, or the silver-tongued King of Annwn, of the lower or southern regions

*River Ebbw (Monmouthshire)*

Here is one tale of the Cwn Annwn from the area around the River Ebbw near Newport in south Wales<sup>29</sup>:

As Thomas Andrews was coming towards home one night with some persons with him, he heard, as he thought, the sound of hunting. He was afraid it was some person hunting the sheep, so he hastened on to meet, and hinder them; he heard them coming towards him, though he saw them not. When they came near him, their voices were but small, but increasing as they went from him; they went down the steep towards the river Ebwy, dividing between this parish and Mynyddislwyn, whereby he knew they were what are called Cwn wybir (Sky dogs), but in the inward part of Wales Cwn Annwn (Dogs of Hell). I have heard say that these spiritual hunting-dogs have been heard to pass by the eaves of several houses before the death of someone in the family. Thomas Andrews was an honest, religious man, and would not have told an untruth either for fear or for favour.

### *Llancarfan (Vale of Glamorgan)*

Marie Trevelyan<sup>30</sup> has these stories about the Cwn Annwn:

Arawn left one of his hounds behind him in an old barn not far from Llancarfan, Glamorgan. There the hateful creature, who had assumed material shape, remained for three months, defying all attempts to dislodge him. Because the strange dog would not go away, people said it was one of the spirit-hounds. The barn was left to the dog, and everybody avoided the place. One night when the tempest was high, Arawn and his hounds were heard shouting and baying above the howling of the wind. Two men passing the barn saw the strange dog springing out and jumping with joy. It ran yelping and barking along the roadway, then with one wild bound vanished, and was never seen again.

The entrance-gate to the drive of an ancient mansion in Glamorgan was formerly the scene of tragedy. For three or four generations the

head of the family had met his death by accident while riding to or from the hunt. The last of the family in the male line broke his neck near the entrance-gate on his return from hunting. He was a wild young man, and always laughed when warned of reckless riding. He was not coming to an “ end like the others.” After his death people said his spectre was doomed to hunt every night with the Cwn Annwn, and never had any rest. They heard him coming through the gate shouting to his hounds and cracking his whip, and his roaring laughter was a thing to remember. Loudly he went out, and was heard madly crossing the country. On his return he was seen silently riding a grey horse, whose flanks were foaming, and from whose nostrils flames of fire issued. Reaching the gate, he immediately vanished. At one time people dreaded passing the mansion in the evening or late at night, and when wild noises were heard, people said, “ It’s the Squire a-huntin’.

In the early medieval period Lancarfan was home to a monastery dedicated to St. Cadoc.

## OMENS OF DEATH

### *Corpse-Candles*

Corpse-candles are interpreted as a sign of impending death, and were first mentioned by Richard Baxter in his book *The Certainty of the world of spirits* (1691)<sup>31</sup>. Marie Trevelyan says<sup>32</sup> that the origin of corpse-candles

is supposed to date back to the fifth century. St. David, the patron of Wales, earnestly prayed that the people he loved, and among whom he toiled, should have some kind of warning to prepare them for death. In a vision he was told that through his intercession the Welsh would never again find themselves unprepared ; for always before such an event the people in the land of Dewi Sant would be forewarned by the dim light of mysterious tapers when and where death might be expected. St. David apparently prayed particularly for South Wales,



because it is said that corpse-candles are seen more vividly and frequently there than in North Wales.

### *Corpse-Candles in Carmarthenshire*

Here are some corpse-candle stories<sup>33</sup>:

In passing Golden Grove from Llandilo to Carmarthen, several people in the eighteenth century saw three corpse-candles gliding down the river at various times three weeks in succession. The persons compared their experiences, and wondered what the omen meant. Was it for the villagers, or was it for the noble family who lived at Golden Grove ? At length the solution came. Three members of the nobleman's family died simultaneously in different parts of the country.

Golden Grove is the site of three mansions. The first was built in 1560 by the Vaughan family; this was destroyed by fire and replaced in 1754 by a Neoclassical box of fine quality with a long doric-columned portico; this was subsequently demolished, and the present mansion was built between 1827-1834. The "noble family" presumably refers to the Vaughans, who were made Earls of Carbery in 1628<sup>34</sup>. Llandeilo is the site of a church first mentioned in the 8th or 9th century, and Carmarthen of course was the Roman town of Moridunum.

At Disgwilfa, about twelve miles from Carmarthen, a mysterious light was seen glimmering in the corner of a field, where the branches of a tall sycamore-tree made a deep shadow. For quite a year, winter and summer alike, this light appeared, and was seen by several persons, who commented upon the strange occurrence. The light glimmered in the corner, about two or three feet from the gate leading into the field, and was always seen between "dusk and dawn/" At last the mysterious light disappeared, and the very next day a gentleman much respected in the district "came to his end " by a fall from his horse. He was hunting, and, while taking the gate, fell over his horse's head, and was killed on the very spot where the glimmering light or corpse-candle had been

seen.

### *Corpse-Candles in Denbighshire*

Here is another story, this time from from Denbighshire<sup>35</sup>:

My informant told me that one John Roberts, Felin-y-Wig, was in the habit of sitting up a short time after his family had retired to rest to smoke a quiet pipe, and the last thing he usually did before retiring for the night was to take a peep into the night. One evening, whilst peering around, he saw in the distance a light, where he knew there was no house, and on further notice he observed that it was slowly going along the road from Bettws-Gwerfil-Goch towards Felin-y-Wig. Where the road dipped the light disappeared, only, however, to appear again in such parts of the road as were visible from John Roberts's house. At first Roberts thought that the light proceeded from a lantern, but this was so unusual an occurrence in those parts that he gave up this idea, and intently followed the motions of the light. It approached Roberts's house, and evidently this was its destination. He endeavoured to ascertain whether the light was carried by a man or woman, but he could see nothing save the light. When, therefore, it turned into the lane approaching Roberts's house, in considerable fear he entered the house and closed the door, awaiting, with fear, the approach of the light. To his horror, he perceived the light passing through the shut door, and it played in a quivering way underneath the roof, and then vanished. That very night the servant man died, and his bed was right above the spot where the light had disappeared.

Felin-y-Wig, or Melin-y-Wig, is near Corwen in Denbighshire. Corwen is best known for its connections with Owain Glyndwr, who proclaimed himself Prince of Wales on 16 September 1400, from his nearby manor of Glyndyfrdwy, so beginning his fourteen-year rebellion against English rule<sup>36</sup>.

### *The Legend of the Tolaeth (Pembrokeshire)*

In many coastal areas of Wales the legend of the Tolaeth was prevalent for many years. It was, simply, a knocking, rapping or shuffling sound that was heard by country people and fishermen just before a death occurred. According to Marie Trevelyan<sup>37</sup>

A fisherman living on the shores of St. Bride's Bay said that for three successive nights in 1903 he was disturbed by the sounds downstairs of shuffling feet, doors opening, chairs being moved, and a grunting sound like that of men laying down a heavy burden or load of something. The man was much troubled in mind about these noises, and mentioned the subject to his wife, who admitted having heard the same sounds. Both agreed that they were nothing less than the Tolaeth. The noises were only heard in the kitchen. A week later their only son was drowned, and his body was brought home on a ladder. The mysterious sounds were exactly reproduced. The shuffling of feet, moving of chairs, and grunting sounds of the men setting down the ladder with its burden — all were heard as in the solitary watches of the night.

St Bride's Bay is near St David's in Pembrokeshire.

### *A Phantom Funeral in Powys*

Another sign of impending death were phantom funerals<sup>38</sup>:

This was a kind of shadowy funeral which foretold the real one. In South Wales it goes by the name *toilu*, *toili*, or *y teulu* (the family) *anghladd*, unburied; in Montgomeryshire it is called *Drychiolaeth*, spectre.

Elias Owen says he received the following “weird tale” from the Rev. Philip Edwards, formerly curate of Selattyn in Shropshire, near the border with Wales.

While the Manchester and Milford Railway was in course of construction there was a large influx of navvies into Wales, and many a

frugal farmer added to his incomings by lodging and boarding workmen engaged on the line. Several of these men were lodged at a farm called Penderlwyngoch, occupied by a man named Hughes.

One evening when the men were seated round the fire, which burned brightly, they heard the farm dogs bark, as they always did at the approach of strangers. This aroused the attention of the men, and they perceived from the furious barking of the dogs that someone was coming towards the house. By-and-by they heard the tramp of feet, mingled with the howling of the frightened dogs, and then the dogs ceased barking, just as if they had slunk away in terror. Before many minutes had elapsed the inmates heard the back door opened, and a number of people entered the house, carrying a heavy load resembling a dead man, which they deposited in the parlour, and all at once the noise ceased. The men in great dread struck a light, and proceeded to the parlour to ascertain what had taken place. But they could discover nothing there, neither were there any marks of feet in the room, nor could they find any footprints outside the house, but they saw the cowering dogs in the yard looking the picture of fright. After this fruitless investigation of the cause of this dread sound, the Welsh people present only too well knew the cause of this visit. On the very next day one of the men who sat by the fire was killed, and his body was carried by his fellow-workmen to the farm house, in fact everything occurred as rehearsed the previous night. Most of the people who witnessed the vision are, my informant says, still alive.

Despite its name, the Manchester and Milford Railway actually ran from Llanidloes in Powys to Pencader in Carmarthenshire – so presumably Penderlwyngoch farm was somewhere in the Llanidloes area (Owen's informant was at Selattyn in Shropshire, which was connected to Llanidloes by a railway line from Oswestry near Selattyn).

*A Phantom Funeral in Llanychllwydog (Pembrokeshire)*

Sometimes phantom funerals were even reported in the newspapers. In an article published in 1898, an account was given of man who encountered a spirit procession some fifty years previously at the church of Llanychllwydog in a valley named Cwm Gwaun near Fishguard in Pembrokeshire<sup>39</sup>:

Harri'r was generally under the influence of Sir John [beer] before he began his homeward journey, and therefore his courage was equal to his needs at any time. On this particular night, when he entered the path in the churchyard of Llanychllwydog, he observed a funeral procession marching in through the gateway at the other end. His valiant heart broke down at the sight, and he took his seat on one of the tombstones, not knowing whether or not he had sunk into the nether world. But he looked around, and Sir John's influence began to forsake him, and reason seemed to assume her throne, and Harri at the restoration of his reasoning faculties recognised his neighbours. Even the horses and carriages were objects he had no difficulty in knowing. Harri could name the persons and describe the order of the procession, and the words and intonations of the officiating priests were quite familiar to him for many a day after the solemn visions of that particular night.

The vision made a sober man of Harri'r Cwman for a long time, and turned out to be true:

The person whose coffin appeared in an apparition was in a short time carried to the very grave where Harri had seen it laid, and the persons forming the procession appeared in the funeral as foreseen by the farmer of Cwm Gwaun.

Llanychllwydog was the site of an early medieval monastery and cemetery dating from the 9th or 10th century.

## WELSH INTERPRETATIONS OF FAIRIES

In Cornwall and Ireland fairies were seen as the souls of the dead, but this idea was less common in Wales. Gerald of Wales implied that the fairies visited by Elidorus in their underground world were earlier residents of Britain, and the American anthropologist Walter Evans-Wentz, writing in 1911, seems to endorse this view. Evans-Wentz spoke to a ninety-four year old Welshman in Ceredigion who had this explanation of faeries, rather similar to that of Gerald of Wales<sup>40</sup>:

‘My grandfather told me that he was once in a certain field and heard singing in the air, and thought it spirits singing. Soon afterwards he and his brother in digging dikes in that field dug into a big hole, which they entered and followed to the end. There they found a place full of human bones and urns, and naturally decided on account of the singing that the bones and urns were of the Tylwyth Teg.’

But there were other opinions about fairies<sup>41</sup>:

‘By many of the old people the Tylwyth Teg were classed with spirits. They were not looked upon as mortal at all. Many of the Welsh looked upon the Tylwyth Teg or fairies as the spirits of Druids dead before the time of Christ, who being too good to be cast into Hell were allowed to wander freely about on earth.’

And an informant from Pembrokeshire had this to say about fairies<sup>42</sup>:

I think the spirits about us are the fallen angels, for when old Doctor Harris died his books on witchcraft had to be burned in order to free the place where he lived from evil spirits. The fairies, too, are sometimes called the fallen angels. They will do good to those who befriend them, and harm to others. I think there must be an intermediate state between life on earth and heavenly life, and it may be in this that spirits and fairies live.

Apart from the fact that they sometimes stole human children, the fairies of Wales were less dangerous than their Cornish or Irish counterparts, and

their place was taken by other supernatural beings. Ceffyl-dwr (“water-horses”) were like aquatic fairies, and they often lured people to their death. Corpse-candles are supernatural events, not beings, but they are similar to the Lantern Man, or Will o’ the Wisp, of Norfolk, a malevolent being that led people to their death in the marshes (see my chapter on the fairies of East Anglia).

Curse tablets are found in or near southeast Wales, and their function is recalled in the tale of St. Cadoc cursing a peasant (the curse is addressed not to a pagan deity but to God, who is asked to take revenge on the peasant).

## CHAPTER 8

### *The Folklore of the Celtic Countries from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century (3) The Fairies, Kelpies and Water-Horses of Scotland*

#### THE VIKING PERIOD IN SCOTLAND

##### *Dal Riata, Pictland and the Vikings*

In the 9th century the Hebrides and Orkney came under Viking control, with the Hebrides being incorporated into Scotland in the 13th century, and Orkney remaining Norse until the 14th century. Dal Riata, which was under Pictish control at the time, was destroyed by Norse raiders, as was the Pictish kingdom of Fortriu, based around the Moray Firth. The Pictish king Kenneth mac Alpin, who died at Forteviot in 858, moved his administrative capital to Scone near Perth, where most Scottish kings were crowned until 1488; and he transferred the bishopric to Dunkeld<sup>1</sup>, where a 9th/10th century carved stone has been found – it shows a man on horseback carrying a spear and drinking from a horn, and a sunken equal-armed cross<sup>2</sup>. As mentioned earlier, Kenneth also had a palace at Forteviot in Perth and Kinross.

The language of Dal Riata was Gaelic (Irish), and Gaelic was mostly confined to Dal Riata until the 8th century, when it began expanding into Pictish areas north of the Firth of Forth and the Firth of Clyde. By 900, Pictish appears to have become extinct, completely replaced by Gaelic. During the reign of Caustantín mac Áeda (900–943), outsiders began to refer to the region as the kingdom of Alba rather than as the kingdom of the Picts.

The use of Gaelic began to decline under Malcolm III (1058-1093),



whose wife Margaret of Wessex spoke no Gaelic. Margaret gave her children Anglo-Saxon rather than Gaelic names, and brought many English bishops, priests, and monks to Scotland. When Malcolm and Margaret died in 1093, the Gaelic aristocracy rejected their anglicised sons and instead backed Malcolm's brother Donald Bàn. Donald had spent 17 years in Gaelic Ireland and his power base was in the thoroughly Gaelic west of Scotland. He was the last Scottish monarch to be buried on Iona, the traditional burial place of the Gaelic kings of Dal Riata and the Kingdom of Alba. However, during the reigns of Malcolm Canmore's sons, Edgar, Alexander I and David I (their successive reigns lasting 1097–1153), Anglo-Norman names and practices spread throughout Scotland south of the Forth–Clyde line and along the northeastern coastal plain as far north as Moray (an area once dominated by the Picts). Norman French completely displaced Gaelic at court. The establishment of royal burghs throughout the same area, particularly under David I, attracted large numbers of foreigners speaking English. This was the beginning of Gaelic's status as a predominantly rural language in Scotland<sup>3</sup>.

### *Govan (Glasgow)*

In 870 Alcluith (Dumbarton) was destroyed by Vikings, and the kingdom of Strathclyde apparently moved to Govan, now a district in the southwest of Glasgow (like Alt Clut, the inhabitant of Strathclyde spoke Brittonic, an early form of Welsh, and Strathclyde is derived from Brittonic Ystrat Clut "Valley of the Clyde"). New archaeological discoveries in and around Govan Old parish church "now suggest that Govan – 11 miles upstream from Dumbarton – was the principal royal centre of Strathclyde during the period. A major administrative centre seems to have been constructed around the church of St. Constantine, which housed a royal burial cult, perhaps dedicated to Constantine I (died 877), the son of the Pictish king Kenneth MacAlpin. Close to the church was an assembly place (an artificial mound known as the Doomster Hill), while across the Clyde was a royal residence at Partick."

The church at Govan is not old, but it houses “a remarkable collection of 31 early medieval sculpted stones”, mostly dating to the 10th or 11th century<sup>4</sup>.

They are all carved in a British style, which has affinities with Pictish, Scottish and Anglo-Norse traditions. Amongst the collection are several monumental crosses and a unique monolithic ‘sarcophagus’ which presumably served as a reliquary. But most important are the grave stones<sup>5</sup> hog-backs and 21 recumbent slabs with interlace crosses. These elaborately treated monuments probably marked burials of the Strathclyde royal house.”

### *Dumfries and Galloway*

The last known Northumbrian bishop of Whithorn was Beadwulf (790-803), and by the 10th century Whithorn was under Viking control. There is considerable evidence for Viking settlement at Whithorn, including carved crosses of the “Whithorn school.” The new ruling class buried their dead beside the old shrine of St Ninian. Among the carved stones found here there were at least 20 small crosses, used as headstones for graves dating from the Viking period. Archaeological excavations in 1984 revealed a range of evidence from this period, including a stake-built house similar to those found in Viking York and Dublin. This was interpreted as part of a secular settlement on the edge of the monastic precinct. Excavations also revealed extraordinary levels of craft working, with Whithorn as part of a vigorous trade network. The Viking rule of Galloway seems to have come to an end around 1100. By the 1120s Galloway dues were being paid to the Scottish king, Alexander I<sup>5</sup>.

### *Orkney*

When the Norse occupied Orkney they left 30 runic inscriptions in the Neolithic tomb called Maeshowe<sup>6</sup>.

According to Orkneyinga saga, over 800 years previously, in the

darkness of an Orkney winter, a group of viking warriors had sought shelter from a terrible snowstorm.

Leading the men was Earl Harald, who, at Christmas, 1153, was making his way from Stromness to the parish of Firth.

The Earl's party took refuge in an already ancient structure – the mound they knew as Orkahaugr. Inside, while waiting for the storm to abate, they carved graffiti into the stone walls.

According to the Saga: “On the thirteenth day of Christmas they travelled on foot over to Firth. During a snowstorm they took shelter in Maeshowe and two of them (his men) went insane which slowed them down badly so that by the time they reached Firth it was night time.”

## SCOTLAND FROM 1066 TO THE REFORMATION

### *Waltheof of Melrose (Scottish Borders)*

Founded in 1136 by David I, Melrose was the first Cistercian Abbey in Scotland. Following significant damage to the original stone church by English armies in 1322 and 1385, rebuilding produced one of Scotland's most important medieval buildings. The scale of the structure and quality of stonework can still be seen, although the Abbey is now partly ruinous<sup>7</sup>.

Melrose Abbey's most famous abbot was Waltheof (1148-1159). Following the death of Waltheof, his successor as Abbot of Melrose, Abbot William, refused to encourage the rumours that were now spreading regarding Waltheof's saintliness. Abbot William attempted to silence these rumours, and prevent the intrusiveness of would-be pilgrims. However, William was unable to get the better of Waltheof's emerging cult, and now his actions were alienating him from his brethren. As a result, in April 1170, William resigned the abbacy. In William's place, Jocelin, the prior of Melrose, became abbot. Jocelin had no such scruples. Jocelin embraced the cult without hesitation. Under the year of Jocelin's accession, it was reported in the Chronicle of Melrose<sup>8</sup>:

The tomb of our pious father, sir Waltheof, the second abbot of Melrose, was opened by Enguerrand, of good memory, the bishop of Glasgow, and by four abbots called in for this purpose; and his body was found entire, and his vestments intact, in the twelfth year from his death, on the eleventh day before the Kalends of June [22 May]. And after the holy celebration of mass, the same bishop, and the abbots whose number we have mentioned above, placed over the remains of his most holy body a new stone of polished marble. And there was great gladness; those who were present exclaiming together, and saying that truly this was a man of God

### *St. Margaret of Dunfermline (Fife)*

St. Margaret of Dunfermline was a member of the old dynasty of Wessex and England. She was the daughter of Edward Atheling and grand-daughter of Edmund Ironside, who was briefly king in 1016 before being defeated by the Danish king Cnut, who ruled England from 1016 until 1035. After Edmund Ironside's death in 1016, Edward Atheling went into exile in Hungary, where he married and had three children, Margaret, Christine and Edgar. Edward Atheling returned to England in 1057, but died within two days of his arrival. Margaret and her siblings were then brought up by the king, Edward the Confessor. After the death of Harold at the Battle of Hastings, Margaret's young brother, Edgar Atheling, was acknowledged as king by many leading English prelates and nobles, but he was never crowned and soon submitted to the Norman conqueror, William I.

Edgar, along with his mother and sisters, fled to Scotland, where they were welcomed by Malcolm III "Canmore", who married Margaret in about 1070. Margaret founded a monastery at Dunfermline in Fife, the place where she had married Malcolm. It is probable that this was initially a daughter house of Canterbury, with Benedictine monks sent from England, but was raised to the status of an independent abbey in 1128. Margaret was herself buried in the church, which served henceforth as a mausoleum of the Scottish kings. The body of her husband, Malcolm Canmore was brought

back from England, where he had been killed, to lie near his queen, while her sons Edgar, Alexander, and David I, were interred there, as was David's successor Malcolm IV<sup>9</sup>.

### *St. Duthac of Tain (Easter Ross)*

St. Duthac is thought to have been born in Tain in Ross-shire, not far from the early monastery at Portmahomack, in about 1000. He was educated in Ireland and went on to become a renowned preacher who attracted a considerable following. He was regarded as sufficiently important for his death to be reported in The Annals of Ulster for the year 1065. Tales of miracles soon grew up around the memory of Duthac. One story related how as a boy he had been sent to collect hot coals from the local smithy. The smith simply placed the hot coals in Duthac's lap, whereupon the boy carried them to his master without ill effect.

In June 1253 St Duthac's remains, said to have been uncorrupted by the passage of two centuries since his death, were returned to Tain and buried in the original St Duthac's Chapel, built on the site of his birth. Its ruins lies on the north east side of the town, in the old town cemetery and near the golf club. This first chapel rapidly became a place of pilgrimage and of sanctuary. Robert the Bruce's family took shelter here en route to Orkney during his exile, but the Earl of Ross took them prisoner anyway, and handed them over to the English in 1307<sup>10</sup>.

### *St Magnus of Kirkwall (Orkney)*

Magnus Erlendsson was the Norwegian Earl of Orkney from about 1108 to 1115. He was supposedly killed, on the orders of his cousin Hakon Palsson, by a blow to the head. This happened in the Easter period on the island of Egilsay, on 16 April, possibly in 1115. A damaged skull, found with other bones on the south side of the choir of Kirkwall Cathedral in 1919, has been taken to be that of Magnus, its patron saint<sup>11</sup>.

The Old Norse Orkneyinga Saga, or History of the Earls of Orkney, composed around 1200 and revised around 1230, gives an account of the

death of Magnus<sup>12</sup>:

When God's friend was led to the blow, he said to Lifolf, 'Stand in front of me, and strike me a great wound on the head, because it is not fitting to cut down chieftains like thieves...' ... After that he crossed himself, and bent under the blow, and his spirit passed to heaven.

The Orkneyinga Saga recounts that the site of Magnus' murder was originally rocky and overgrown, but after his death "God showed that he had suffered for righteousness' sake" and the area was miraculously transformed into a green field. Magnus's corpse was transferred to Birsay, possibly to the site of the present St Magnus Kirk. From the day of his burial a bright, heavenly light was said to have been seen above Magnus' grave. This holy light was accompanied by a "heavenly fragrance". Before long, as the cult of Magnus grew, other stories began to spread, each detailing the miraculous happenings around about the Earl's gravesite. For example, a man called Thorkell who lived in Orkney "fell from his barley-rick right down to the ground and was maimed all down one side. He was taken to the shrine of the blessed earl Magnus and recovered his health there."<sup>13</sup>

### *St. Ninian of Whithorn (Dumfries and Galloway)*

In 1128 Fergus of Galloway appointed Gilla-Aldan as bishop of Whithorn. This re-established the bishopric here, which had lapsed under Viking rule. Fergus initially placed a community of Augustinians here, but they were replaced by Premonstratensians in around 1175, possibly from nearby Souleseat Abbey. Whithorn became a cathedral priory, where the bishop shared his church with a monastic community. Most surviving structures at Whithorn were built during the Premonstratensian period – they built cloisters and a great, cross-shaped cathedral on the site of the earlier church to accommodate their rounds of prayers<sup>14</sup>.

In the later Middle Ages, Ninian became one of Scotland's most popular saints, and the shrine at Whithorn became a popular place of pilgrimage.

Royal pilgrims at Whithorn in the later middle ages included Robert I, James III, James IV and James V as well as a number of their queens, Margaret Logie in 1365, Mary of Guelders in 1462 and Margaret of Denmark in 1473 and 1474 and Margaret Tudor in 1507<sup>15</sup>.

### *St. Mungo of Glasgow*

In the 12th century, the kingdom of Strathclyde was incorporated into Scotland, and the ecclesiastical focus switched to Glasgow, with the building of the first Glasgow Cathedral in the 12th century. The patron saint of the new cathedral was St. Kentigern, also known as St. Mungo. He supposedly lived in the 6th century, and is known to us through the *Life* of the saint, written around 1185 by Jocelin of Furness, and based on an earlier *Fragmentary Life*. There is only one early reference to Kentigern. A clerk of St David's in southwest Wales, in compiling the earliest version of the *Annales Cambriae* ('Annals of Wales'), composed an entry for the year 612 or 613 that records the 'Death of Conthigirn and Bishop Dyfrig'<sup>16</sup>. This annal was probably entered in the last decade of the 8th century, nearly 200 years after the deaths of Conthigirn and Dyfrig. The *Annales Cambriae* is mainly concerned with events relating to saints bishops and kings, and since there is no record of a king called Conthigirn, we must assume he was a bishop or saint.

While there may have been a local cult of Kentigern in Strathclyde, there is little evidence of widespread interest in the saint before the 12th century. The cult that developed from the early 1100s was the result of the promotional activities of a series of bishops who, following the creation of the diocese of Glasgow by David I, encouraged the cult of their patron with building campaigns, translations and the production of two new Lives. The most active of these bishops was Jocelin (1174-1199) – his most notable success was the development of a close relationship between the saint and the royal house. For William I (1165-1214), Kentigern was a personal intercessor second only to his commitment to Thomas Becket of Canterbury, to whom his new foundation at Arbroath was dedicated.

Although it has been suggested that royal interest in the saint began to wane after William's death, Alexander II and III continued to be major patrons of Glasgow Cathedral throughout the 13th century<sup>17</sup>.

## THE MEDIEVAL TALE OF THOMAS THE RHYMER IN FAIRYLAND

The first Scottish tale of fairies and fairyland is *Thomas of Erceldoune*, a romance of the Scottish Borders, written in Middle English sometime before 1440. Thomas of Erceldoune was a real person who lived in the late 13th century in Erceldoune, now Earlston in the Scottish Borders, just to the north of Melrose. He was famous for being able to foretell the future, and the romance explains how he acquired this gift. The story starts at "Huntly Banks" and the "Eildon Tree", which is thought to be on Eildon Hill near Melrose<sup>18</sup>:

As I walked out alone one day,  
My mind fixed fast on my lament,  
Upon a merry morning of May  
Along by Huntly Banks I went.

In the distance he saw a beautiful lady mounted on a magnificent horse<sup>19</sup>:

Three greyhounds on a leash she led,  
Running beside her seven more.  
A hunting horn on her neck she had  
And arrows tucked in the belt she wore.

Thomas lay and beheld that sight  
From underneath a seemly tree.  
He said, "Yon's Mary, most of might,  
Who bore the Child that died for me!

"Unless I speak with that lady bright,



My heart will surely break in three!  
Now I shall run with all my might  
To meet her at the Eildon Tree.”

So quickly, Thomas, up he rose  
And ran across both hill and lea,  
And if it be as the story goes,  
He met her at the Eildon Tree.

And kneeling down upon his knee,  
He said, beneath that greenwood spray,  
“Lovely lady, rue on me,  
Queen of Heaven, as you well may!”

Then spoke that lady mild of thought  
“Thomas, let such notions be.  
The Queen of Heaven I am not,  
Nor ever took such high degree.

“I am of another country, though,  
And after the wildwood deer I ride.  
That’s why I am appareled so,  
My greyhounds running at my side.”

After learning that the beautiful lady was not the Queen of Heaven, Thomas asked if he could have sex with her, promising to live with her for evermore if she granted his wish; the beautiful lady said he could have sex with her, but if he did so he would destroy her beauty. After which Thomas “seven times beside her lay”, and, as she had warned, she did lose her beauty, turning into a hag wearing tattered clothes. Thomas then had to keep his promise to live with her for evermore<sup>20</sup>.

Thomas looked upon that sight.  
“Alas,” he said, “alas, this place!  
In faith this is a doleful plight.  
How you have faded in your face  
Who like the sun were shining bright!”

“Thomas, take leave of sun and moon  
And all the life that grows on tree.  
This twelve-month with me you’ll be gone  
And middle earth you shall not see.”

So Thomas and the once beautiful lady set off<sup>21</sup>:

She led him in at Eildon hill  
Underneath a secret lea,  
Where black as midnight the waters chill  
Rose up higher than his knee.

And when it seemed three days had passed,  
And he heard only the river sigh,  
“Oh woe is me,” he said at last,  
“For lack of food I’ll surely die!”

She led him into a garden fair  
Where fruit was growing beyond the gate.  
Ready and ripe were apple and pear  
And also the damson-plum and date.

But Thomas could not eat the fruit there, for if he did he would go straight to Hell. The once beautiful lady then showed him a number of paths – one to Heaven, another to Paradise, a third led to “endless pain”, and a fourth to Hell. Finally she showed him her dwelling<sup>22</sup>:

“And see you yonder castle fair  
Standing upon the hill so high?  
There’s nothing to match it anywhere  
Of town or tower, beneath the sky.

Forsooth, Thomas, it is my own,  
Shared with the king. But Thomas, stay!  
I would rather be hanged and drawn  
Than let him know that with me you lay!”

By this time the beautiful lady had regained her beauty, and Thomas followed her into the castle. Thomas stayed there for what seemed to him a few days (but was in fact three years), until the beautiful lady said he must go<sup>23</sup>:

“Get ready, Thomas, to go again,  
For longer here you may not be.  
Hurry with all your might and main.  
I’ll take you back to the Eildon Tree.”

Thomas begged to be allowed to stay, but the beautiful lady explained why this was not possible:

“Tomorrow the fiend comes out of Hell  
Among this folk to fetch his sheep.  
Since you’re so big and handsome as well,  
I know you’re one he’ll wish to keep.”

Thereupon, the beautiful lady took Thomas back to the Eildon Tree, and before they parted she gave him the gift of prophecy.

Eildon Hill was an ideal place to find fairies. A hill-fort, the largest in Scotland, being 39 acres in extent, occupies the summit of Eildon Hill North, a height of 1385 feet above sea-level. No less than 296 hut floors have been identified within the fort, and since most of these owe their

survival to the fact that they are scooped out on slopes, the number should perhaps be doubled to allow for the more level areas<sup>24</sup>.

## LATER TALES OF FAIRIES

### *Scottish Borders*

Thomas the Rhymer was renowned for his prophecies, and by around 1700 the medieval romance had become a ballad, which Sir Walter Scott adapted in the early 1800s. Here is the beginning of Walter Scott's version<sup>25</sup>:

True Thomas lay on Huntlie bank:  
A ferlie [wonder] he spied wi' his ee;  
And there he saw a lady bright,  
Come riding down by the Eildon Tree.

Her shirt was o' the grass green silk,  
Her mantle o' the velvet fyne;  
At ilka [every] tett of her horse's mane,  
Hang fifty siller [silver] bells and nine.

True Thomas, he pull'd aff his cap,  
And louted [bowed] low down to his knee—  
—"All hail, thou mighty Queen of Heav'n!  
For thy peer on earth I never did see."—

—"O no, O no, Thomas," she said;  
"That name does not belang to me;  
I am but the Queen of fair Elfland,  
That am hither come to visit thee.

"Harp and carp, Thomas," she said;  
"Harp and carp along wi' me:  
And if ye dare to kiss my lips,  
Sure of your bodie I will be."—

—“Betide me weal, betide me woe,  
That weird [fate] shall never danton [frighten] me.”—  
Syne [Then] he has kissed her rosy lips,  
All underneath the Eildon Tree.

—“Now, ye maun go wi’ me,” she said;  
“True Thomas, ye maun go wi’ me:  
And ye maun serve me seven years,  
Thro’ weal or woe as may chance to be.”—

She mounted on her milk-white steed;  
She’s ta’en true Thomas up behind;  
And aye, whene’er her bridle rung,  
The steed flew swifter than the wind.

O they rade on, and further on;  
The steed gaed [went] swifter than the wind;  
Untill they reached a desart wide,  
And living land was left behind.  
—“Light down, light down, now, true Thomas,  
And lean your head upon my knee:  
Abide and rest a little space,  
And I will shew you ferlies [wonders] three.

Scott built himself a country house near Melrose called Abbotsford, and Huntlie-bank is thought to be derived from Huntlywood, which was part of Scott’s estate.

Between the southernmost and central peaks of Eildon is a little hill long known from its shape as the Lucken Hare. Lucken means “closed” or “compact”, and here means that the hare looks as if it is crouching down. The hill is the setting for one version of a legend which Sir Walter Scott meant to use for a novel, and which he tells in the preface to the 1829 edition of *Waverley* as it was current in the Borders in his time<sup>26</sup>:

A horse-coper [horse-dealer] called Canobie Dick (from Canonbie, Dumfriesshire) was riding over Bowden Moor one moonlit night with a pair of horses he had been unable to sell, when he met an aged man in antique costume who bought them both, paying for them in ancient golden coins. He asked the copper to bring more horses to that spot, which Dick did more than once, the last time hinting to the old man that there was no luck in a dry bargain. The old man thereupon led him up a narrow path to the Lucken Hare. Dick was startled to see the old man enter at the foot of the hill by a passage or cavern he had never noticed, though he knew the Lucken Hare well. Inside they came to stables filled with coal-black horses, and by each horse a sleeping knight in coal-black armour. At the far end of the great hall stood a table on which were lying a sword and a horn. The old man, who now revealed himself as the prophet Thomas of Erceldoune, told Dick that he who drew the sword and sounded the horn would be king of all Britain – but that everything hung on which he took up first. The copper seized the horn and blew a blast, and the thunderous peal it made woke the knights. Seeing them coming at him, he dropped the horn and tried to raise the sword, but heard a great voice proclaim:

Woe to the coward that ever he was born,  
Who did not draw the sword before he blew the horn!

A whirlwind then carried Dick off and cast him down the bank, where he was found next morning by shepherds. He lived just long enough to tell his tale.

### *Dumfries and Galloway*

R.H. Cromek, writing in 1810, tells this tale of fairies at Burrow Hill in Dumfries and Galloway<sup>27</sup>:

The ‘ Fairy Farewel,’ is a circumstance that happened about twenty years ago, and is well remembered. The sun was setting on a fine

summer's evening, and the peasantry were returning from labour, when, on the side of a green hill, appeared a procession of thousands of apparently little boys, habited in mantles of green, freckled with light. One, taller than the rest, ran before them, and seemed to enter the hill, and again appeared at its summit. This was repeated three times, and all vanished. The peasantry, who beheld it, called it ' The Fareweel o' the Fairies to the Burrow hill!'

Burrow Hill or Burrow Head is an Iron Age coastal promontory fort at Whithorn in Dumfries and Galloway. The main features are the double ramparts and ditches on the west side, while an additional rampart and ditch have been interpolated on the east. The innermost rampart is best preserved on the west side of the entrance, where it is 5 feet 6 inches high internally; on the east side of the entrance it is fragmentary. The inner ditch is also best preserved on the west, where it is 5 feet deep, but the medial rampart is best east of the entrance, where it is 5 feet 6 inches high on both sides. The outer rampart and ditch are best preserved in the northwest. It is not possible to determine the chronological relationship between this fort and another fort, on the east side of Burrow Head, without excavation as the point of junction between their respective ditches is obscured by the causeway<sup>28</sup>.

Mochrum is not far from Whithorn, and was once the site of Myrton Castle, a 16th century tower house raised on top of a 12th century motte built for the MacCullochs. Their line came to an end with Sir Godfrey MacCulloch, executed in March 1697. But Sir Walter Scott, writing in 1802, said that he did not die but had been saved by a fairy<sup>29</sup>:

As [Sir Godfrey MacCulloch] was taking the air on horseback, near his own house he was suddenly accosted by a little old man arrayed in green, and mounted upon a white palfrey. After mutual salutation, the old man gave Sir Godfrey to understand that he resided under his habitation, and that he had great reason to complain of the direction of a drain, or common sewer, which emptied itself directly into his chamber

of daïs [2](#). Sir Godfrey Macculloch was a good deal startled at this extraordinary complaint; but, guessing the nature of the being he had to deal with, he assured the old man, with great courtesy, that the direction of the drain should be altered; and caused it to be done accordingly. Many years afterwards Sir Godfrey had the misfortune to kill, in a fray, a gentleman of the neighbourhood. He was apprehended, tried, and condemned. The scaffold upon which his head was to be struck off was erected on the Castle Hill of Edinburgh; but hardly had he reached the fatal spot when the old man, upon his white palfrey, pressed through the crowd with the rapidity of lightning. Sir Godfrey, at his command, sprung on behind him; the “good neighbour” spurred his horse down the steep bank, and neither he nor the criminal was ever again seen.

Myrton Castle is close to the White Loch of Myrton, the site of a crannog, an artificial island built in a lake as a dwelling place. At the White Loch of Myrton the crannog appears as a stone and timber mound with a dense concentration of over 100 vertical piles in an area some 20 metres by 40 metres occurring around the north-eastern margins of the site<sup>30</sup>. As part of the Celtic Crannogs Project, a small trial trench was excavated on the surface of White Loch of Myrton Crannog, 4–6 April 2016, to assess the character of surviving archaeological deposits and to provide context for a programme of lake sediment coring undertaken in the loch. The remains of a possible ruinous wall were encountered in the upper deposits of the trench, beneath which was an ashy, charcoal-rich occupation deposit containing animal bone fragments. A surface of flat slabs, probably paving, was encountered at around 3 feet below the surface of the crannog, approximately at the water table, which prevented further investigation. Coring of the crannog mound identified six layers of non-oak timber interspersed with peaty soils beneath the paved surface identified in the trench. Radiocarbon dating of wood samples from this core indicated that the lowest timbers were felled in the period 715–455 BC, while deposits from above the paving date to the period 393–206 BC<sup>31</sup>.



## *Perthshire*

Near Dollar in the Ochil Hills in Perthshire is the village of Glendevon. At the top of the glen, through which runs the River Quaich, is a low round hill known as Maiden Castle, which is traditionally believed to be a fairy hill, as recorded by John Rhys<sup>32</sup>:

A piper, carrying his pipes, was coming from Glendevon to Dollar in the grey of the evening. He crossed the Garchel (a little stream running into the Queich burn), and looked at the “Maiden Castle,” and saw only the grey hillside and heard only the wind soughing through the bent. He had got beyond it when he heard a burst of lively music: he turned round, and instead of the dark knoll saw a great castle, with lights blazing from the windows, and heard the noise of dancing issuing from the open door. He went back incautiously, and a procession issuing forth at that moment, he was caught and taken into a great hall ablaze with lights, and people dancing on the floor. He had to pipe to them for a day or two, but he got anxious, because he knew his people would be wondering why he did not come back in the morning as he had promised. The fairies seemed to sympathize with his anxiety, and promised to let him go if he played a favourite tune of his, which they seemed fond of, to their satisfaction. He played his very best, the dance went fast and furious, and at its close he was greeted with loud applause. On his release he found himself alone, in the grey of the evening, beside the dark hillock, and no sound was heard save the purr of the burn and the soughing of the wind through the bent. Instead of completing his journey to Dollar, he walked hastily back to Glendevon to relieve his folk's anxiety. He entered his father's house and found no kent face there. On his protesting that he had gone only a day or two before, and waxing loud in his bewildered talk, a grey old man was roused from a doze behind the fire ; and told how he had heard when a boy from his father that a piper had gone away to Dollar on a quiet evening, and had never been heard or seen since, nor any trace of him

found. He had been in the “castle “ for a hundred years.

The name Maiden Castle is found throughout Britain, the most famous being the Maiden Castle hillfort in Dorset. There are a number of hills in Scotland called Maiden Castle, but the most famous is (or was) Castellum Puellarum (“Castle of Maidens”), another name for Edinburgh Castle, first used by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 12th century<sup>33</sup>. It is not clear how and when Glendevon’s Maiden Castle came by its name, but it may be connected to Glendevon Castle, a 15th century tower house that belonged to the Douglas earls of Angus.

### *Moray*

In the late 17th century Duffus in Moray, not far from Sculptor’s Cave at Covesea and the Pictish fort at Burghead, was associated with fairies<sup>34</sup>:

In the seventeenth century there was in the possession of Lord Duffus an old silver cup, called the Fairy Cup, concerning which the following tradition was related to John Aubrey, the antiquary, by a correspondent writing from Scotland on the 25th of March 1695. An ancestor of the then Lord Duffus was walking in the fields near his house in Morayshire when he heard the noise of a whirlwind and of voices crying: “Horse and Hattock!” This was the exclamation fairies were said to use “when they remove from any place.” Lord Duffus was bold enough to cry “Horse and Hattock” also, and was immediately caught up through the air with the fairies to the King of France’s cellar at Paris, where, after he had heartily drunk, he fell asleep. There he was found lying the next morning with the silver cup in his hand, and was promptly brought before the King, to whom, on being questioned, he repeated this story; and the King, in dismissing him, presented him with the cup.

Lord Duffus presumably lived in Duffus Castle, a motte-and-bailey castle in use from 1140 to 1705.

### *Argyll and Bute*

However, not all fairies lived in groups. The being which attached herself to the farm-house of Auchindarroch (Achadh-nan-darach, “Field of Oaks) in Glen Duror, Appin (Argyll and Bute), was variously known as the Glaistig (a type of ghost) and as the Gruagach (maiden) of Glen Duror<sup>35</sup>:

She attended to the cattle, and took particular charge of keeping the calves from the cows at night. She followed the house (not the family), and was alive not many years ago. A portion of milk was poured out for her every evening on a stone called Clach na Glaistig (the Glaistig stone), and once this was neglected by a new tenant, the calves were found next morning with the cows. Her face was described by those who professed to have seen her, as being like a grey stone overgrown with lichens. A servant girl, going on a dark evening to draw water from a stream flowing past the house, was asked by her fellow-servants if she was not afraid of the Glaistig. In her reply she spoke contemptuously of that being, and on her way to the stream received a slap on the cheek that twisted her head to one side. The following evening, going on the same errand, she got a slap on the other cheek that put her head right.

Fairies are not always so benevolent. Just to the west of Appin is Rahoy on Loch Sunart, and a woman and her baby were taken by fairies<sup>36</sup>:

[She] was taken with her babe to Ben ladain (Beinn ladain), a lofty hill in the parish of Morvern, rising to a height of above 2000 feet, and at one time of great note as an abode of the Fairies. Her husband had laid himself down for a few minutes’ rest in the front of the bed, and fallen asleep. When he awoke his wife and child were gone. They were taken, the woman afterwards told, to the “Black Door”, as the spot forming the Fairy entrance into the interior of the mountain is called. On entering, they found a large company of men, women, and children. A fair-haired boy among them came and warned the woman not to eat any

food the Fairies might offer, but to hide it in her clothes. He said they had got his own mother to eat this food, and in consequence he could not now get her away.

But fortunately she was rescued:

That same night the woman appeared to her husband in his dreams, telling him where she was, and that by going for her and taking the black silk handkerchief she wore on her marriage day, with three knots tied upon it, he might recover her. He tied the knots, took the handkerchief and a friend with him, entered the hill at the Black Door, and recovered his wife and child. The white-headed boy accompanied them for some distance from the Black Door, but returned to the hill, and is there still in all probability.

John Gregorson Campbell in *Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*<sup>37</sup>, tells this story of Lorne, a district on the west coast of Scotland, now part of Argyll:

Donald, who lived in Gortan du in Lorn, was working in a drain with a pointed spade. One evening, having left the spade standing in the drain, he was startled by something striking it with a loud knock. He found the noise was made by the blow of a smooth, polished, flint-like stone. He put this in his pocket and took it home. Some evenings after, “Calum Clever,” already mentioned as frequently carried about by the Fairies, was shown the stone. He declared that it had been thrown by himself at the instigation of the Fairies, who wanted to take Donald himself. Donald of Gortan du was a cooper, and was wanted to make a barrel for a cow the elves had just killed.

The location of Gortan Du is unclear, but it is probably not far from the Mesolithic shell midden and Iron Age burial site at Oban. Elsewhere<sup>38</sup>, Campbell surmises that the flint arrow is Neolithic, but “Popular imagination, struck by its curious form, and ignorant of its origin, ascribed

it to the Fairies.” Indeed, Neolithic flint arrow heads were often called elf-arrows or elf-bolts in Scotland. George Fraser Black, in *Scottish Charms and Amulets* (1894) notes<sup>39</sup>:

According to the late Dr John Hill Burton, cited by Sir John Evans, it was an article of faith in Scotland, so late as 1872, “that elf-bolts, after finding, should not be exposed to the sun, or they are liable to be recovered by the fairies, who then work mischief with them.” In Sutherlandshire, it is stated by Mr Hew Morrison, a Fellow of the Society, that in his younger days “arrowheads of flint were religiously consigned to the nearest loch, or buried out of sight, as instruments of evil;”

### *Orkney*

Orkney does not have fairies, but it does have the hogboon. The word hogboon is a corruption of the Old Norse haug-bui, or haug-buinn, roughly translated as “mound-dweller” or “mound-farmer”. At one time almost every mound in Orkney was said to house a hogboon, including Maeshowe. When Maeshowe was first excavated, in 1861, local tradition regarded it as the home of the unpleasant creature known as the “Hugboy”. This ancient individual was a Hogboon, or Haugbui, one of Orkney’s many mound-dwelling supernatural creatures. In 1862, Maeshowe’s excavator, James Farrer, wrote: “The country people state that the building (Maeshowe) was formerly inhabited by a person named Hogboy, possessing great strength.”<sup>40</sup>

This account of a hogboon, published in *Old Lore Miscellany* in July 1911, tells of a farmer who opened a large howe in one of his fields. Upon breaking open the mound, he was confronted by the angry mound-dweller, who appeared with threatening words. In this case, it was said that the mound’s guardian was: “an old, grey-whiskered man dressed in an old, grey, tattered suit of clothes, patched in every conceivable manner, with an old bonnet in his hand, and old shoes of horse or cowhide tied on with strips

of skin on his feet.” His angry words, as the farmer remembered them, were:

thou are working thy own ruin, believe me, fellow, for if thou does any more work, thou will regret it when it is too late. Take me word, fellow, drop working in my house, for if thou doesn’t, mark my word, fellow, if thou takes another shuleful {shovelful}, mark me word, thou will have six of the cattle deean in thy corn-yard at one time. And if thou goes on doing any more work, fellow – mark me word, fellow, thou will have then six funerals from the house, fellow; does thou mark me words; good-day, fellow...

Having said his piece, the dweller vanished and was never seen again. However, six cattle are alleged to have died in the corn-yard and a further six deaths in the household soon followed. The teller of the story was present when the fourth death occurred and was told about the mound-dweller and his warning<sup>41</sup>.

Apparently it was necessary to give offerings to a hogboon at his mound. In 1866, on the island of Westray, when calves were born, people used to go to Muilie, a large mound in Skelwick, where they would pour milk and meal through a hole on the top. Somewhat earlier, in a letter on Orkney antiquities dated 1833, a Mr J. Paterson wrote concerning another Westray mound-dweller. “Wilkie” was a creature after whom two burial mounds of Westray – Wilkie’s Knowes – were named. Paterson explained that: “there (was) a tradition prevalent that all the natives of Westray were in the habit of dedicating to him daily a certain proportion of milk. The milk was poured into a hole in the centre of one of the tumuli.” He goes on to say that if the offering was neglected, goods might disappear or be stolen, livestock would sicken or houses would be “haunted by him.”<sup>42</sup>.

## WATER-HORSES, KELPIES AND MERMAIDS

### *Mull (Inner Hebrides)*

Water-monsters have a long history in Scotland – witness St. Columba's encounter with such a monster in the River Ness. Water-horses seem to be peculiarly Celtic, since there were water-horses (ceffyl-dwr) in Wales. According to John Gregorson Campbell<sup>43</sup>, "The Kelpie that swells torrents and devours women and children has no representative in Gaelic superstition. Some writers speak as if the Water-horse were to be identified with it, but the two animals are distinctly separate. The Water-horse haunts lochs, the Kelpie streams and torrents." Gregorson Campbell says of the water-horse<sup>44</sup>:

The belief in the existence of the Water-horse is now in the Highlands generally a thing of the past, but in olden times almost every lonely freshwater lake was tenanted by one, sometimes by several, of these animals. In shape and colour it resembled an ordinary horse, and was often mistaken for one. It was seen passing from one lake to another, mixing with the farmers' horses in the adjoining pastures, and waylaid belated travellers who passed near its haunts. It was highly dangerous to touch or mount it. Those whom it decoyed into doing so were taken away to the loch in which it had its haunt, and there devoured.

One water-horse tale concerns the son of the tenant of Aros in Mull, an island in the Inner Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland<sup>45</sup>:

The heir of Aros, a young man of great personal activity, and, it is said, of dissolute manners, having an opinion of himself that there was no horse he could not ride, was taken by a Water-horse into Loch Frisa, a small lake about a mile in length in the north-west of Mull and devoured. This occurred between his espousal and marriage, and the Lament composed by his intended bride is still and deservedly a popular song in Mull. There seems to be this much truth in the story, that the young man was dragged into Loch Frisa by a mare which he was attempting to subdue and drowned. It would appear from the song that his body was recovered.

Aros presumably refers to Aros Castle, which was probably built by one of the MacDougall lords of Lorn in the 13th century. It first comes on record in the later 14th century when it was in the possession of the Lords of the Isles. It appears to have been garrisoned by Argyll's troops in 1690, though it was described two years previously as 'ruinous, old, useless and never of any Strength'. Throughout the 18th century the lands of Aros were farmed by a succession of Campbell tacksmen (lease-holders), but there is no record of the castle having been inhabited at this period<sup>46</sup>. Loch Frisa is the site of a crannog called Eilean Ban, located 42m off the western shore of Loch Frisa at roughly the midpoint of the loch. It is roughly circular in shape, measuring 14m by 17m. Dry stone walling was traced around the perimeter of the structure, standing up to 1.5m on the northeast and sides. Underwater investigation showed that the northwest section of the crannog is built on a sheer 4m cliff of bedrock. Two alder timbers were found underneath the cliff-edge projecting from the bottom of a heap of stone rubble. Each is about 0.2m in diameter and 5m long. Both have been split in half and are likely to be part of the islet's structure. One timber was sampled and produced a radio carbon date of around 200 BC, setting at least one phase of this site firmly in the Iron Age<sup>47</sup>. There may have been a later phase, since the visible remains are thought to be of late medieval or 17th century date<sup>48</sup>.

### *Barra (Outer Hebrides)*

Here is another water-horse story, this time set on the island of Barra in the Outer Hebrides<sup>49</sup>:

There was a young woman in Barra who met a handsome looking man on the hill. They chatted together, and at last he laid his head on her lap. She noticed when he slept that his hair was mixed with 'rafagach an locha,' a weed that grows in lakes, and she became suspicious that her friend was the water-horse in disguise. She cut off the part of her clothes on which his head rested, and slipped away without waking



him. A considerable time after, on a Sunday after Mass, a number of people were sitting on the hill and she along with them. She noticed the stranger whom she had met on the hill approaching, and she got up to go home so as to avoid him. He made up to her, notwithstanding, and caught her, and hurried off and plunged with her into the lake, and not a trace of her was ever found but a little bit of one of her lungs on the shore of the lake.

### *The River Conon (Ross and Cromarty)*

The River Conon in Ross and Cromarty, to the northwest of Inverness, was home to a kelpie. The Kelpie of the River Conon is, or was, a highly dangerous spirit. According to Hugh Miller, writing in 1854, it usually appeared “as a tall woman dressed in green, but distinguished chiefly by her withered, meagre countenance, ever distorted by a malignant scowl”. She would leap out of the stream when travellers were passing and point at them with a skinny finger or beckon them to follow. On one occasion a Highlander’s journey took him at nightfall to the banks of the river, where he was seized by her. Although the lad who was with him tried to help as the man clung to a tree, she was too strong for them both, and the unfortunate traveller was dragged into the middle of the current and drowned<sup>50</sup>.

### *Holywood (Dumfries and Galloway)*

The kelpie of the River Conon is like the mermaids of the Derbyshire Peaks and the Staffordshire Moorlands – but also like the mermaids of Scotland. One of the best known Scottish mermaids was associated with Cowhill Tower, a 16th century dwelling on the banks of the River Nith above Dumfries. According to R.H. Cromek, writing in 1810, it was the home of William Maxwell, the bridegroom in the ballad “The Mermaid of Galloway.”

Every night of the new moon for over ten years, the ballad begins, the mermaid had been seen sitting on the green bank and combing her yellow

hair. Like the sirens of classical mythology, she had a seductive and fatal voice: though the very birds in the trees were charmed by her singing, whoever listened or went to her never wakened again in this life. One summer her song was heard by the heir of Cowhill, and although he was about to be married he became determined to find the singer<sup>51</sup>:

William sought out the mermaid and tried to persuade her to come back with him to 'bonnie Cowehill'. Although the mermaid herself reminded him of his young bride waiting at home, he asked the mermaid for a love token. Round his head she tied a lock of her hair so tight that it caused him burning pain, and he begged her to loosen it. Then he laid his head among the water lilies, and while he slept she worked her magic:

She weaved owre [over] his brow the white lilie,  
Wi' witch-knots mae [more] than nine;  
'Gif [If] ye were seven times bride-groom owre,  
This night ye shall be mine.'

Roused by her taunting mentions of his bride preparing for her splendid wedding, William looked up 'faintlie, slowlie' and tried too late to free himself from the witching bands. She took his green mantle, silken cap, and bridal ring and threw them in the sea, then, folding him in her arms, she plunged below the waves.

Cowhill Tower is the parish of Holywood, and here there is a stone circle called The Twelve Apostles, of which eleven stones, the highest standing to 1.9m above ground level, remain. They form a circle 89m in diameter, a size appropriate to such a monument as a henge. A 4 inch bronze figure of an ecclesiastic was dug or ploughed up at the stone circle some years before 1882 – it has been identified as St. Norbert, founder of the Premonstratensian order, which had an abbey at Holywood in the Middle Ages<sup>52</sup>.

## GHOSTS IN THE LANDSCAPE

### *Loch Tay (Perthshire)*

Breadalbane is the area around Loch Tay in the Highlands of Perthshire, and in the 1760s Thomas Pennant recorded an interesting story from Breadalbane which involves a crowd of ghosts who sound very much like fairies<sup>53</sup>:

The belief in spectres still exists; of which I had a remarkable proof while I was in the county of Breadalbane. A poor visionary, who had been working in his cabbage garden, imagined that he was raised suddenly into the air, and conveyed over a wall into an adjacent corn-field; that he found himself surrounded by a crowd of men and women, many of whom he knew to have been dead some years, and who appeared to him skimming over the tops of the unbended corn, and mingling together like bees going to hive: that they spoke an unknown language, and with a hollow sound: that they very roughly pushed him to and fro; but on his uttering the name of God, all vanished but a female sprite, who seizing him by the shoulder, obliged him to promise an assignation, at that very hour, that day sevensnight: that he then found that his hair was all tied in double knots, and that he had almost lost the use of his speech: that he kept his word with the spectre, whom he soon saw come floating thro' the air towards him: that he spoke to her, but she told him at that time she was in too much haste to attend to him, but bid him go away, and no harm should befall him; and so the affair rested when I left the country.

### *Grantown-on-Spey (Moray)*

There is a spirit called Meg Mulloch, associated with Grantown-on-Spey in Moray, and first recorded in the late 18th century<sup>54</sup>

Opposite to Kincharden, lieth the parish of Inver-ellon [Inverallan] belonging to the Laird of Grant. The Chief family here is that of

Clanphadrike, Tullachcorume being the Head of that Tribe of the name of Grant. In old there frequented this family a Spirit called Meg Mulloch. It appeared like a little Boy, and in dark nights would hold a candle before the Goodman, and shew him the way home, and if the Goodwife would not come to bed, it would cast her in beyond him and if she refused to bring what he desired, it would cast it before him.

Inver-ellon, or Inverallan, is now part of Grantown-on-Spey. Not far from Grantown-on-Spey is Aviemore on the River Spey, which has a Bronze Age burial site known as a clava ring-cairn. There is very little cairn material left, and the central area seems to have been disturbed. The outer kerb is almost complete, with a diameter of 42 feet and slight traces of a bank against the outside; only 5 of the inner ring stones are now visible. The outer ring of monoliths now consists of 4 stones set about 17 feet from the kerb, but there were 7 in 1877<sup>55</sup>. Not far away is Grenish, an impressive Clava ring-cairn, its form perfectly apparent despite some interior disturbance. The kerb, diameter 56 feet, is almost complete. The outside circle of monoliths is now represented by two prostrate slabs (probably over their original positions) part of another, and 4 hollows probably indicating the former positions of stones removed<sup>56</sup>.

### *Cromarty (Ross and Cromarty)*

The town of Cromarty lies to the northeast of Inverness not far from Tain, the home of St. Duthac, and is associated with a spectral Green Lady. According to Hugh Miller in his description of Cromarty<sup>57</sup>:

A large house of this kind, on the eastern side of the street, was haunted, it was said, by a green lady, one of the old Scottish spectres, who flourished before the introduction of shrouds and dead linens ; and another on the opposite side, by a capricious brownie, who disarranged the pieces of furniture and the platters every night the domestics set them in order, and set them in order every night they were left disarranged.

Elsewhere Miller says<sup>58</sup>:

I have heard imperfectly preserved stories of a lady dressed in green, and bearing a goblin child in her arms, who used to wander in the night time from cottage to cottage, when all the inhabitants were asleep. She would raise the latch, it is said, take up her place by the fire, fan the embers into a flame, and then wash her child in the blood of the youngest inmate of the cottage, who would be found dead next morning. There was another wandering green lady, her cotemporary, of exquisite beauty and a majestic carriage, who was regarded as the Genius of the smallpox, and who, when the disease was to terminate fatally, would be seen in the grey of the morning, or as the evening was passing into night, sitting by the bedside of her victim.

*Robert Kirk and The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*

Robert Kirk (1644-1692) was an Episcopalian minister and Gaelic scholar who spent much of his life in Balquhiddy and Aberfoyle, both near Loch Lomond in the west of Scotland, and wrote a book about fairies; this was first published by Walter Scott in 1815, and Andrew Lang published another edition with a commentary in 1893. Fairies lived in “fairy hills”, and there was such a hill at Aberfoyle called Doon Hill. According to Kirk, says Lang, the Highlanders “superstitiously believe the souls of their Predecessors to dwell” in the fairy-hills. “And for that end, say they, a Mote or Mount was dedicate beside every Churchyard, to receive the souls till their adjacent bodies arise, and so become as a Fairy hill.”<sup>59</sup>.

Kirk says of fairy beliefs<sup>60</sup>: “‘Tis one of their Tenets, that nothing perisheth, but (as the Sun and Year) every Thing goes in a Circle, lesser or greater, and is renewed and refreshed in its Revolutions.” Later he adds<sup>61</sup>: “They are not subject to sore Sicknesses, but dwindle and decay at a certain Period, all about one Age. Some say their continual Sadness is because of their pendulous State, as uncertain what at the last Revolution will become

of them, when they are lock't up into one unchangeable Condition." Some say<sup>62</sup> that fairies are "departed Souls, attending awhile in this inferior State, and clothed with Bodies procured through their Almsdeeds in this Lyfe; fluid, active, ætheriall Vehicles to hold them, that they may not scatter, or wander, and be lost in the Totum [Whole], or their first Nothing; but if any were so impious as to have given no Alms, they say when the Souls of such do depairt, they sleep in an unactive State till they resume the terrestriall Bodies again." This sounds very much like a cycle of reincarnation, and is not far from the Cornish belief that fairies who take animal form "get smaller and smaller with every change, till they are finally lost in the earth as muryans (ants)."

## CHAPTER 9

### *The Folklore of the Celtic Fringe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century (1) The Folklore of Wessex: Fairies, Demon Horses, and King Arthur*

#### THE WESSEX REGION

The term Wessex was popularised in the 19th century by the novelist Thomas Hardy, who set a series of novels in a semi-fictional Wessex, centred around Dorset and his birthplace of Dorchester, which he called Casterbridge. But in the early medieval period, Wessex – the kingdom of the West Saxons – was an Anglo-Saxon kingdom, before Anglo-Saxon rule was swept away by the Norman Conquest of 1066. Between the 6th and early 8th centuries the kingdom of Wessex consisted of Hampshire, Wiltshire, Dorset and Somerset, and it is these counties that I will be considering here. There is good evidence that there were Celtic-speaking people in the early kingdom of Wessex, and Celtic place-names can be found in Somerset, west Wiltshire, and parts of Dorset such as Cranborne Chase.

#### THE EARLY ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD

##### *Hampshire*

Wessex is on the Celtic fringe because there is evidence that Celts survived in Somerset, west Wiltshire and parts of Dorset into the 6th century, while Anglo-Saxons were settling in Hampshire and southeast Wiltshire. The first Anglo-Saxons in Hampshire settled around the old Roman town of Winchester, where a number of early cemeteries have been found. The best

known of these was the cremation and inhumation cemetery at Worthy Park, Kings Worthy, to the north of Winchester. It included 94 inhumations and 46 cremations. The majority of the inhumations were accompanied by grave goods which included beads, brooches, buckles, knives, latchlifters, purse mounts, rings, shield bosses, spearheads and tweezers. Wood stains indicating traces of either coffins or wooden lining were recorded in eight of the graves. All the cremations were placed in urns. A number also had grave goods including miniature toilet implements. The cemetery is thought to date between the late 5th and the 7th century<sup>1</sup>.

In around 660 AD Winchester became the seat of a bishop, with the construction of the Old Minster. An indication of Winchester's new status is shown by a late 7th century burial in Lower Brook Street. Here a female was buried with an elaborate necklace. The young woman wore as many as thirty rings of silver wire, two strung with beads, six assorted bullae (amulets) and a gold ring, which together formed a collar encircling the neck, resting on the clavicles of the skeleton and perhaps originally stitched to the woman's garment<sup>2</sup>.

### *Wiltshire*

From Winchester a Roman road led to Salisbury (Sorvidunum), and there are two notable cemeteries near Salisbury. The cemetery at Petersfinger, on the eastern outskirts of Salisbury, was first recorded in 1846 when a cutting for the South-Western Railway at Petersfinger was under construction. Further inhumations were discovered after a fall of chalk which necessitated a widening of the cutting. Excavations also took place between 1948-1951 revealing 70 inhumations lying both north-south and east-west and accompanied by grave goods. The bulk of the associated grave goods are Frankish, perhaps mid-6th century onwards, and later Saxon goods<sup>3</sup>. Inhumations lying north-south are likely to be pagan Saxon, while inhumations lying east-west may be Romano-British or Christian.

An Anglo-Saxon inhumation cemetery in the Low Field, Harnham, in the south of Salisbury, was excavated by Akerman during 1853/4. Excavations



revealed sixty-four shallow graves, containing 73 skeletons, accompanied by a variety of Saxon ornaments and weapons, including a fork and a bronze-bound wooden dish. A bronze Roman coin accompanied one burial and Akerman claimed that the burials had abraded Romano-British sherds deliberately placed over them. The burials were mainly extended and orientated east to west; no traces of coffins were found, but most of the bodies were protected by large flint stones, placed to form a coffin-like cist. Frankish grave goods appear to the earliest present, suggesting a mid 6th and 7th century date<sup>4</sup>. The east-west orientation of the burials suggests a Romano-British or Christian influence.

Salisbury was not established until the early 13th century, and the main Anglo-Saxon town was Wilton, which lies to the west of Salisbury. In 1860, a hanging bowl was discovered midway between Wilton House (the site of Wilton Abbey) and Kingsbury Square (the site of the royal residence during the Saxon period). The bowl is thought to be of British post-Roman workmanship, dating to around 450 AD. It is made from copper alloy, but tests show that the metal also contains a small amount of gold. Hanging bowls are often found in late 7th century Anglo-Saxon graves, and it may have once accompanied the burial of a member of the Wessex elite<sup>5</sup>. Wilton is named after the River Wylye, which in its upper reaches is called the Deverill, a name related to Welsh *dwfr* “water” and *ial* “fertile or cultivated upland region.”<sup>6</sup>

The monastery of Malmesbury in northwest Wiltshire first entered the historical record in around 675, when the scholar, poet, and later Bishop of Sherborne, Aldhelm, became abbot there. But according to tradition a religious community was founded there at a much earlier date by a certain Maildub, who was apparently one of those Irish citizens of post-Roman Britain “whose pioneering missionary work among the Anglo-Saxons may have been obscured in the standard account of the Conversion”<sup>7</sup>. The best evidence for Maildub’s existence is the name Malmesbury, which means “Maeldub’s fortification”<sup>8</sup>. In Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* Malmesbury is

Maildubi urbs, a Latin form of the name Maldubesburg in some of the abbey's earliest records<sup>9</sup>. According to the early 12th century historian William of Malmesbury, Maildub established a hermitage there, but was later forced to accept a group of disciples, among them Aldhelm. He is said to have built a small church there, which could still be seen a few years before the date William was writing (1125).

### *Somerset*

Somerset remained in British hands until the 6th century, but by the 7th century Anglo-Saxons were settling in Somerset. According to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, in 688 King Ine of Wessex “succeeded to the kingdom of Wessex and held [it] 37 years; and he built the minster at Glastonbury.”<sup>10</sup> We know from William of Malmesbury<sup>11</sup> that there was already a church at Glastonbury in Somerset, dedicated to St Mary, when Ine established his monastery. This church, known as the Old Church, was of “wattle-work”, and extremely ancient, since “No other hands than those of the disciples of Christ erected the church of Glastonbury”. William associated the church with the disciples of Christ, but most archaeologist “consider it more likely that the Old Church itself was originally a 7th century building”. The dimensions of the church given in the medieval period “are too large for a wattled church but comparable with major Irish timber churches of the 7th century ... and there does appear to have been a considerable Irish influence at Glastonbury”<sup>12</sup>. William of Malmesbury says that Glastonbury “possessed the relics of several Irish saints, St. Brigit and St. Benignus among them. More important, the remains of St. Patrick and St. Indract were said to be housed in stone shrines within the Old Church of St Mary of Glastonbury – St Patrick on the south side of the high altar, St Indract on the north”<sup>13</sup>. The church that Ine built, to the east of the Old Church was a stone church dedicated to St Peter and St Paul which was extended eastwards and later, probably by 760, was joined to the Old Church by means of an atrium. The first cloister, on the model of St. Gallen in Switzerland, was probably begun by St. Dunstan in the 10th century.

Dunstan further extended the abbey church by adding a porticus (side chapel) and building a tower over its east end as well as an aisled eastern arm. His church was described as a basilica<sup>14</sup>.

## A SHORT HISTORY OF THE KINGDOM OF WESSEX

### *Domination by Mercia*

The kingdom of Wessex was founded in the 7th century, but its history is obscure until the 9th century. King Ine abdicated in 726, and Wessex was then dominated by the Midlands kingdom of Mercia under three strong kings, Æthelbald (716-757), Offa (757-796) and Coenwulf (796-821). After the death of Coenwulf, Mercia was temporarily weakened. In 825 Egbert of Wessex defeated Beornwulf of Mercia at the Battle of Ellandun (now Wroughton near Swindon), and in 829 he invaded Mercia and drove out the Mercian king Wiglaf – although Wiglaf regained his throne in 830.

### *The End of Mercian Domination, Viking Attacks, and the Triumph of King Alfred*

During the 9th century the Vikings began attacking Wessex and other parts of England. These attacks became more serious in 865 when, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle<sup>15</sup>, “a great [heathen] raiding-army came to the land of the English and took winter-quarters in East Anglia”. The Great Heathen Army crossed into Northumbria and in 866 captured York. In the following year the Danes went into Mercia and fixed their winter headquarters at Nottingham. The Mercian king Burgred appealed to Æthelred for help, and the two besieged Nottingham, and made peace with the Danes. In 870 the Danes conquered the kingdom of East Anglia and destroyed the monastery of Medhamstede (Peterborough).

In 878, the Danes launched a surprise attack on the royal estate at Chippenham, northwest Wiltshire, where King Alfred was staying. Alfred managed to escape and sought refuge at Athelney, an island in the Somerset Levels, where he later established a monastery. The place-name Athelney

has been translated as “isle of the aethelings” and is traditionally the place where Æthelwine (a member of the Wessex royal family) lived as a hermit in the mid-7th century. From there Alfred was able to rally local militias from Somerset, Wiltshire and Hampshire. In May 878 Alfred met the combined militias of Somerset, Wiltshire and “that part of Hampshire which was on this side of the sea”<sup>16</sup> (that is, west of Southampton Water), at Egbert’s Stone east of Selwood, and fought the Danes at Ethandun (possibly Edington, near Westbury in Wiltshire). He defeated them and pursued them to Chippenham, where he starved them into submission. Guthrum, the leader of the Danes, surrendered to Alfred, and agreed to convert to Christianity. Some weeks later, according to the Chronicle, Guthrum and 29 of his men were baptised at Aller near Athelney, and this baptism was further celebrated at the royal vill of Wedmore in Somerset. Following this celebration, Guthrum and the Danes left Wessex and returned to East Anglia.

In the same year, or perhaps in 880, after the death of the Mercian king Ceolwulf II, Alfred and Guthrum signed a treaty which divided up the kingdom of Mercia: Alfred would rule West Mercia, while Guthrum would incorporate East Mercia into an enlarged kingdom of East Anglia – the Danish lands now included Essex, East Anglia, the Kingdom of York (Northumbria between the River Tees and the Humber), the so-called Five Boroughs (the Mercian towns of Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Nottingham and Stamford in the East Midlands), and some towns to the south like Northampton, Bedford and Cambridge. Alfred also had control of the Mercian city of London.

## THE SAINTS OF LATE ANGLO-SAXON WESSEX

### *St. Swithun of Winchester*

Alfred died in 899, and for the next 50 years the kings of Wessex concentrated on driving the Vikings out of England. Once the Vikings were gone, the churchmen of Wessex began promoting saints’ cults. In the 970s

Æthelwold, bishop of Winchester, set about creating a saint for Winchester. Swithun was an obscure bishop of Winchester between 852 and 863, and it is not clear why he was chosen to become the patron of the Old Minster. In 971 his relics were lifted from a prominent stone sarcophagus outside the west door of the Old Minster, and translated into the Old Minster itself. King Edgar commissioned a lavish gold and silver reliquary to house the saint's relics, and within a few years Æthelwold began reconstructing the minster on a vast scale in order to incorporate the site of Swithun's original tomb and to make it the focal point for the saint's cult<sup>17</sup>.

Nowadays, St. Swithun (or Swithin) is only remembered because of a piece of English weather-lore. St. Swithin's day falls on July 15, and according to an ancient ryme

St Swithun's day if thou dost rain  
For forty days it will remain  
St Swithun's day if thou be fair  
For forty days 'twill rain nae mare

The St Swithun's Day legend is an old one –the earliest surviving written reference dates back to the 14th century<sup>18</sup>.

### *St. Edith of Wilton*

By 934 there was a nunnery at Wilton, the Anglo-Saxon capital of Wiltshire (now overshadowed by its near neighbour Salisbury), which by the 11th century had acquired a royal saint. Edith (Eadgyth) was a daughter of King Edgar (959 – 975) and the noblewoman Wulfthryth, born in 961. When her mother retired from secular life to become abbess of Wilton, Edith also entered the foundation and remained there until her death at the age of twenty-three<sup>19</sup>.

According to Goscelin, who wrote her Life in the late 11th century, Edith was a rather eccentric saint, and did not wear the black habits expected of a nun<sup>20</sup>. She wore fine clothes, but senior nuns testified that she wore a hairshirt “which gave a false appearance of inner delicacy by a purple

exterior, although observance of the rule would have required black.” Indeed, bishop Æthelwold “once warned this pearl of such sweet devotion, with her rather ornate habit, thus: “O daughter, not in these garments does one approach the marriage chamber of Christ, nor is the heavenly bridegroom pleased with exterior elegance”; she, conscious of her indwelling guest, and conscious perhaps of her harsh inner garment, is reported to have replied in these words: “Believe, reverend father, a mind by no means poorer in aspiring to God will live beneath this covering than beneath a goatskin. I possess my Lord, who pays attention to the mind, not the clothing.”<sup>21</sup>

In the matter of clothing, it seems that Edith had the last laugh. Once a serving woman dropped a still burning candle into a chest full of Edith’s clothes, and the chest caught fire. As Goscelin says: “When they unfolded the garments, made of skin or purple, and examined them separately ..., by the marvellous grace of the everlasting guardian, all the things were found to be as they had been before the fire, unharmed by all the burning.”

Unusually for an Anglo-Saxon saint, Edith was associated with animals. Edith, it seems, kept a menagerie of wild animals. As Goscelin tells us<sup>22</sup>:

Standing with the open doorway of the enclosures, she would call by a pet name the ferocious branching-antlered stag. He would spring forward at the well-known voice and laying aside his ferocity would accept with a gentle mouth bread from the hand of the virgin lady. The rest of the animals would run together for the blessing of the lady whose kindness they sensed.

Like Celtic saints, Edith was able to tame wild animals.

### *St. Aldhelm of Malmesbury*

By the 10th century Aldhelm, abbot of Malmesbury and bishop of Sherborne, was being venerated as a saint. William of Malmesbury, writing in the early 12th century, says of Aldhelm<sup>23</sup>:

There is a village in the county of Somerset called Doultling, and it was here that Aldhelm ended his life. He had long ago given the village to the monks of Glastonbury, though arranging to have the usufruct of it himself. The building which witnessed his end was a wooden church. As he was drawing his last breaths he gave orders for his body to be carried into it, so he might die in that particular spot, as succeeding generations, down to the villagers of today, have asserted he did. Later on the church was rebuilt of stone. A monk from Glastonbury was attending to its consecration in the name of God, when a woman who had been blind in both eyes for a long time, came up to the packed crowd and with remarkable faith pushed her way through the mass, shouting for someone to lead her to the altar, as she had a total belief that the saint, whose church was being consecrated, would cure a widow's blindness, seeing that throughout his life he had always given the customary alms to widows. Her bold belief brought down help from the sky and a clear light filled her widowed eyes. A miracle performed before so many people could not be hidden, especially as the woman and her blindness were very well known in the area. It is also said that the saint as he was dying rested on a stone in this church, which is known to have cured many sick people with the water in which it had been washed

According to William, Aldhelm's body was taken from Doultling to be buried in the church of St Michael in Malmesbury.

### *St. Edward the Martyr of Shaftesbury*

Edward the Martyr was born in 962 and became king in 975 on the death of his father Edgar. The succession was disputed, with some supporting his half-brother Æthelred, and in 978 Edward was murdered at Corfe Castle in Dorset, probably by supporters of Æthelred. The Chronicle has a very colourful report of the murder<sup>24</sup>:

This year was King Edward slain, at eventide, at Corfe-gate, on the

fifteenth day before the calends of April. And he was buried at Wareham without any royal honour. No worse deed than this was ever done by the English nation since they first sought the land of Britain. Men murdered him but God has magnified him. He was in life an earthly king – he is now after death a heavenly saint. Him would not his earthly relatives avenge – but his heavenly father has avenged him amply. The earthly homicides would wipe out his memory from the earth – but the avenger above has spread his memory abroad in heaven and in earth. Those, who would not before bow to his living body, now bow on their knees to his dead bones. Now we may conclude, that the wisdom of men, and their meditations, and their counsels, are as nought against the appointment of God.

In its entry for 980, the Chronicle reports that “Alderman Aelfhere fetched the body of the holy King Edward at Wareham, and carried him with great solemnity to Shaftesbury”, a monastery in Dorset on the edge of Cranborne Chase, founded in the late 9th century and closely associated with King Alfred. Aelfhere was a supporter of Æthelred, and his reburial of Edward’s remains was perhaps a gesture of reconciliation.

## WESSEX FROM THE NORMAN CONQUEST TO THE REFORMATION

### *Dorset*

The site of the Abbey Church of St. Mary and St. Edward at Shaftesbury in Dorset was excavated on five occasions between 1816 and 1955, revealing the remains of a late 11th/early 12th century cruciform structure; the eastern arm of three bays had a central apse and was flanked by chapels with smaller apses. Early in the 14th century a chapel with crypt beneath, was built in the angle between the north chapel and north transept with entrance to the crypt by a canted flight of stairs. A leaden casket was unearthed in 1931 at the chapel and contained the fractured remains of a young man,



plausibly identified as the relics of St. Edward<sup>25</sup>.

Shaftesbury Abbey was already wealthy by the time of the Norman Conquest, and the Norman and Plantagenet kings by their gifts and privileges added enormously to the power and wealth already enjoyed by the abbey. The endowment of the monastery was so considerable and the extent of its possessions so vast that in the Middle Ages there was a popular saying, “If the abbot of Glastonbury could marry the abbess of Shaftesbury their heir would hold more land than the king of England.”<sup>26</sup>.

The Benedictine Abbey of Cerne Abbas to the north of Dorchester was traditionally supposed to have been founded by St. Augustine but, though there was evidence of a monastery here in the late 9th century, it was in 987 that the monastery was founded or refounded by Ethelmaer, Earl of Cornwall and dedicated to St Mary, St Peter and St Benedict. The conventual buildings were destroyed soon after the Dissolution in 1539 and no record survives of the appearance or dimensions of the church or claustral buildings<sup>27</sup>.

### *Hampshire*

After the Norman Conquest a new cathedral was built at Winchester to replace the Old Minster. Work was begun in 1079 by Walkelin, the first Norman bishop, and was probably finished by Bishop Henry of Blois (d. 1171)<sup>28</sup>. The New Minster burnt down in 1094, and in 1110 the abbey moved to a new site at Hyde, outside the city walls, and from then on was known as Hyde Abbey<sup>29</sup>.

Beaulieu Abbey was a Cistercian abbey at Beaulieu in the New Forest that moved from Faringdon (Oxfordshire) in 1204, and was dissolved in 1538. The 13th century refectory is in use as the parish church, dedicated to St. Bartholomew, the dormitory is now used as a cafeteria and museum, whilst the Great Gatehouse is incorporated in Palace House built in 1872<sup>30</sup>.

### *Wiltshire*

When William the Conqueror invaded England he established a castle at the

hillfort of Old Sarum, together with the first Salisbury Cathedral. In the early 13th century the cathedral was transferred to its present location, along with the bones of Osmund. Osmund was a Norman aristocrat and Bishop of Salisbury from 1078 to 1099. The see had been formed by uniting those of Sherborne in Dorset (established under Aldhelm in 705) and Ramsbury in Wiltshire (established by Edward the Elder in 909) and making the new centre at the hillfort of Old Sarum to the north of Salisbury, where the cathedral was built in the same enclosure as the royal castle. Osmund died on 4 December 1099 and was buried in his cathedral at Old Sarum. His chasuble and staff were among the treasures there in 1222; but in 1226 his body and its tomb were translated to the new cathedral of Salisbury. In 1228 Gregory IX authorized preliminary enquiries into his life and miracles with a view to canonisation, but these came to nothing. Further attempts to obtain the canonization were made in 1387 and 1406. In 1412 Robert Hallam, Bishop of Salisbury, took up the cause, and in 1416 his canons allocated a tenth of their income for seven years for this purpose. Further petitions were made, supported by Henry V and Henry VI; further commissions investigated more miracles, and the canonisation was finally pronounced by Callistus III in 1456<sup>31</sup>.

Malmesbury Abbey church was built between 1160-70 and had 13th/14th, and 15th century additions. It was damaged by the fall of a tower before 1539 and in 1541 the nave became the parish church<sup>32</sup>. Malmesbury had been famous for its learning in the time of Aldhelm, and this continued after the Norman Conquest with the work of the Anglo-Norman monk and historian William of Malmesbury. In 1091 Godfrey, a monk of Jumièges (Normandy), who had been steward and guardian of the vacant abbey of Ely for several years, became abbot of Malmesbury. Godfrey was active in adorning the church and increasing the goods of the monastery and he gained William of Malmesbury's gratitude by building up a fine library in place of the former meagre collection of volumes, a task in which the historian himself took part<sup>33</sup>.

A number of monasteries were founded close to Malmesbury Abbey. Bradenstoke Priory, to the southeast of Malmesbury, is a priory of Augustinian canons founded in 1142 at Bradenstoke-cum-Clack and dissolved in 1539. It was then converted into a farm which has 18th and 19th century additions<sup>34</sup>. Close to Bradenstoke Priory is Clack Mount, believed to represent the site of a Norman motte and bailey castle<sup>35</sup>.

A priory of Benedictine nuns was founded at Kington St. Michael, between Malmesbury and Chippenham and not far from the Romano-British temple at Nettleton, before 1155 and was dissolved in 1536. It was dedicated to St. Mary. All that now remains is the western range, of 15th century date with guest hall and lodging and the frater (dining room) of 13th century date, on the south side of the cloister<sup>36</sup>.

The Cistercian monastery at Stanley, not far from Calne, which may have remained British into at least the 5th century, was founded in 1151 at Loxwell in Calne Without but moved to Stanley in 1154. Originally founded by the Empress Matilda at Loxwell but moved to Stanley by Henry II. Most of the monastery was rebuilt in the early 13th century. It was dissolved 1536. The site is marked by the remains of mill or fish-ponds, enclosure ditches and the steads of buildings. Finds of coffins, coins and encaustic tiles were recorded in the 18th/19th centuries. When the railway was cut through the area, more burials were found and “a blacksmith’s forge with small coal” (the Abbey was licensed to dig iron ore in Pewsham Forest in the reign of Edward I). Much architectural debris is built into farm walls and a “font” or stoup from the church was on the lawn of the new farmhouse in 1894<sup>37</sup>.

Lacock Abbey, to the south of Chippenham and not far from Roman Bath, was an Augustinian nunnery founded in 1229 and dissolved in 1539. At the dissolution, the Abbey consisted of a church with claustral buildings to the north. The church was destroyed soon after the Dissolution, and consisted of a nave and chancel in one, of seven bays, with a Lady Chapel to the south. Only the north wall of the church survives, forming as it does,

the South side of the claustral range. The claustral buildings included the sacristy, chapter house, dorter, dormitory, reredorter and frater<sup>38</sup>.

### *Somerset*

Glastonbury Abbey was destroyed by fire in 1184; the relics of Patrick and Indract, the latter probably an Irish abbot, were translated to the Lady chapel in 1186 from where they had lain between two “pyramids”, probably 10th-century cross shafts bearing the names of the abbey’s early patrons. The bones of St. Dunstan, abbot of Glastonbury in the 10th century, were claimed to have been re-discovered after the fire and were housed in a feretory embellished or remade in the 14th century; its location in the church is unknown and it may have been portable. The reputed bones of King Arthur and his queen, exhumed around 1191 from the south side of the Lady chapel, were reburied before the high altar in the sanctuary of the church in 1278, flanked by the tombs of Edmund I and Edmund Ironside. In the mid 14th century St. Joseph of Arimathea (the man who was responsible for burying Jesus after the Crucifixion) was claimed as one of the founders of the abbey, and a chapel in the cemetery was dedicated to him in 1382. His cult had become a major draw by 1500, and the Lady chapel was later known as St. Joseph’s chapel<sup>39</sup>.

## TWO MEDIEVAL FOLK TALES OF WESSEX

### *Sir Orfeo and the King of Fairyland*

As the Anglo-Saxon capital of England, Winchester attracted its fair share of wonder tales, including a reworking of the classical tale of Orpheus and Euridyce. The Middle English poem *Sir Orfeo* was probably written in the late 13th or early 14th century, within the Westminster-Middlesex area (now the City of London and Greater London)<sup>40</sup>. Sir Orfeo was king of Winchester when his wife Heurodis was abducted by the king of fairyland. He then renounced the kingship and scoured the countryside in search of Heurodis. As Sir Orfeo wandered in the wilderness<sup>41</sup>

On burning mornings often there  
He saw the King of Fairyland  
Hunting round him with his band  
With dim crying and blowing sounds  
Amid the baying of the hounds.  
They caught no prey, nor could he tell  
What afterwards to them befell.

Then one day he saw

Sixty ladies riding by  
As blithe and fair as birds on spray,  
With not a man in all their band.  
Each bore a falcon on her hand  
And hawking rode beside the river,  
Which many game-birds made their haunt –  
Mallard, heron, cormorant.  
And when they from the water rise,  
The falcons mark them with their eyes,  
And each one strikes his victim dead.  
Orfeo watched and laughing said:  
‘By my faith, most pleasant game!  
I shall join them in God’s name!  
Such things I knew in former days.’  
He rises, thither makes his way,  
But then a lady meets his gaze:  
He clearly understands and sees  
By every token, that she is  
His queen, the Lady Heurodis.  
He look on her, and she on him  
In longing, but no word is said.  
Then when she saw the wretched state

Of him who had been rich and great,  
The tears came falling from her eyes.  
This the other ladies saw,  
And forced the queen to ride away.  
And she could stay with him no more.

Orfeo followed the ladies:

Then rode the ladies in at a rock,  
And Orfeo followed, pausing not.  
Three miles or more within the rock  
He came upon a pleasant plain,  
As bright as sun on summer's day,  
Smooth and level and wholly green,  
Where neither hill nor dale was seen.  
And there upon the plain he saw  
A castle of amazing height,  
A royal one whose outer wall,  
Like crystal, glittered clear and bright;  
And on it stood a hundred towers,  
Marvellous forts of mighty power.

Orfeo entered the castle, telling the porter that he was a minstrel come to entertain the castle's lord with music. The porter let him in<sup>42</sup>:

Once inside he looked about  
And saw, disposed within the court,  
A host of people thither brought  
As being dead, though they were not.  
Some, though headless, stood erect,  
From some of them the arms were hacked,  
And some were pierced from front to back,  
And some lay bound and raging mad.

And some were choked while at their food,  
And some were drowning in a flood,  
And some were withered up by fire;  
Wives lay there in labour-bed,  
Some raving mad, and others dead.  
And also many others lay  
As if asleep at height of day,  
like that they had been snatched away  
And taken there by fairy riders.  
There he saw his own dear life,  
The Lady Heurodis his wife,  
Asleep beneath an orchard-tree.

The castle of the king of fairyland is magnificent, but inside are the living dead, including Heurodis. It is clear from the earlier description that when the king of fairyland goes hunting he goes hunting for souls that he takes back to his castle. This whole episode recalls the “army of the dead” described by Orderic Vitalis, and the link between fairies and the souls of the dead in the Celtic regions of Cornwall, Ireland and Scotland.

### *King Arthur and the Butterfly Bishop*

King Arthur started in the 9th century as a Welsh folk hero; in the early 12th century the Norman cleric Geoffrey of Monmouth transformed him into a warrior and king who fought the Saxons and created a mighty empire; in the late 12th century the French poet Chrétien de Troyes used King Arthur’s court as the setting for a series of adventures, which introduced new Arthurian characters like Perceval and Lancelot; and by the early 13th century the story of Arthur had become linked to the quest for the Holy Grail. These stories were taken up by English writers, and Arthur became associated with Glastonbury and, as in this tale, from the *Lanercost Chronicle*, with Winchester, the Anglo-Saxon capital of England

Lanercost Priory near Carlisle in Cumbria, northwest England, was

founded around 1169 as a house of Augustinian canons, and in the 14th century it produced a Chronicle, which covered the years 1201-1346. The *Lanercost Chronicle*, in its entry for 1216, has the curious story of King Arthur and the Butterfly Bishop. Peter des Roches, bishop of Winchester was out hunting one day when he came across a beautiful new house which he had never seen before<sup>43</sup>:

He admired its charm, was amazed that anyone could conceive it, and hastened to take a closer look. So, as he was approaching it, there ran towards him a number of servants splendidly dressed, who hastily urged him to come at once to the feast of the king, who was expecting him; he hesitated and excused himself, saying that he had with him no dress suitable for a bishop's dinner-party. They however put on him a suitable mantle and brought him into the court to the presence of the king, who greeted him as his guest. He took his place on the right of this great prince, where there were placed before him dishes and drinks of choice quality. This however did not deter him from asking the king during the meal who he was and from whence he had come: the king declared that he was Arthur, once overlord of the whole kingdom of Britain. Peter congratulated him and asked him if he was well: 'In truth,' he replied, 'I look for God's great mercy'. The bishop then said, 'My lord, who will believe me when I say that on this day I saw or spoke to King Arthur?' The king replied 'Close your right hand,' and as he did so he continued, 'Open it': when he did so, out flew a butterfly. 'Throughout your life,' he said, 'you will have this as my memorial, that at whatever time of year you wish to see this kind of insect fly, do as you have just done and your wish will be fulfilled.' This sign later became so well known that men often asked for a butterfly as a blessing, and many used to call him the Butterfly Bishop. What by this the soul of Arthur wished to teach men to the present day, let him reflect who is able to guess.



## LATER TALES OF FAIRIES AND PIXIES

### *Hackpen Hill (Wiltshire)*

Hackpen Hill is in the parish of Broad Hinton to the north of Avebury, the site of a Roman settlement next to the Late Neolithic Silbury Hill, and not far from Dauntsey where a number of Celtic names are preserved. In his late 17th century work *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme*, John Aubrey has these tales of fairies on Hackpen Hill<sup>44</sup>:

Some were led away by the Fairies, as was a Hind [farm-worker] riding upon Hackpen with corne, led a dance to Devizes. So was a shepherd of Mr. Brown, of Winterburn Basset: but never any afterwards enjoy themselves. He sayd that the ground opened, and he was brought into strange places underground, where they used musicall Instruments, violls, and Lutes, such (he sayd) as Mr. Thomas did play on.

Two possible Bronze Age barrows have been identified on Hackpen Hill – and fairies are often associated with prehistoric barrows.

### *Blackdown Hills (Somerset)*

Richard Bovet, writing in 1641, discusses fairies on the Blackdown Hills in Somerset<sup>45</sup>:

The place near which they most ordinarily shewed themselves, was on the side of a Hill, named Blackdown, between the Parishes of Pittminster, and Chestonford, not many miles from Tauton: Those that have had occasion to Travel that way, have frequently seen them there, appearing like Men and Women of a stature, generally, near the smaller size of Men; their habits used to be of red, blew, or green, according to the old way of Country Garb, with high crown'd hats. One time about 50 years since, a person (living at Comb St. Nicholas, a Parish lying on one side of that hill, near Chard) was riding towards his home that way; and saw just before him, on the side of the hill a great company of People, that seemed to him like Country Folks, Assembled, as at a Fair;

there was all sorts of Commodities to his appearance, as at our ordinary Fairs; Pewterers, Shoe-makers, Pedlars, with all kind of Trinkets, Fruit, and drinking Booths; he could not remember any thing which he had usually seen at Fairs, but what he saw there: It was once in his thought that it might be some Fair for Chestonford, there being a considerable one at some time of the year; but then again he considered that was not the season for it; he was under very great surprize, and admired what the meaning of what he saw should be; at length it came into his mind what he had heard concerning the Fairies on the side of that hill: and it being near the Road he was to take, he resolved to ride in amongst them, and see what they were; accordingly he put on his Horse that way; and though he saw them perfectly all along as he came, yet when he was upon the place where all this had appeared to him, he could discern nothing at all, only seemed to be crouded, and thrust, as when one passes through a throng of people: all the rest became invisible to him, until he came at a little distance, and then it appeared to him again as at first. He found himself in pain, and so hasted home; where being arrived, a Lameness seized him all on one side, which continued on him as long as he lived, which was many years

The Blackdown Hills are on the Somerset/Devon border; Pitminster is on the northern edge of the Blackdown Hills, 4 miles south of Taunton and just to the east of Wellington; Churchinford (Chestonford) is to the south of Pitminster; Combe St. Nicholas is on the eastern edge of the Blackdown hills, not far from the barrow cemetery at Otterford. There is a large Bronze Age bowl barrow in Combe St. Nicholas – it was converted into a beacon in the 17th century, and could well have been the haunt of fairies.

#### RUBOROUGH CAMP (SOMERSET)

Ruborough Camp, an Iron Age hillfort at Broomfield, 5 miles north of Taunton, is associated with buried treasure and fairies, as reported in 1857

by the Revd. J.W. Collins<sup>46</sup>:

From the circumstance of the valuable relics said to have been found in the field, the enclosure of the camp is called by the residents in the neighbourhood, ‘ The Money Field’; and the commonly reported tradition is, that ‘ underneath the surface is an iron castle full of gold and silver, guarded by gnomes and spirits’. On my first visit to the camp, about ten years ago, I was informed by a labourer then working in the enclosure, ‘ that there was more treasure under his feet than was contained in the palaces of all the kings in the world’. I inquired of him how he knew this ; and he replied that he was always told so by aged persons, and that the gipsies had told him so ; and that the precious things found in the field proved the truth of it. ‘ Why, then,’ I asked, ‘ do you not dig in the field till you come to the castle, and make yourself rich from the treasures in it ?’ ‘ Ah, sir,’ he answered, ‘ I wish I could ; but there is only one iron door to the castle, and I know not where to find it ; and it can only be found at full moon.’ As I felt interested by his information, I now inquired how these things could be known ; and he then related the following amusing tradition, which I will relate as nearly as I can in his own words :

“ ‘My father told me that, when he was a boy, a doctor Farrer lived in the parish, who was an uncommon book-learned man, and that he found out from his books how to go into the castle. In the day before the full of the moon the doctor went over the field with a two-year old shoot of hazel in his hand, and when he came over the door the stick stood upright of itself, in the ground. When he had marked the place he went home to prepare for going down to the castle ; and in the middle of the night he came back to the place he had marked, with his servant and the tools he wanted for digging ; and he took also a Bible in his hand. ‘Now,’ said the doctor to his servant, ‘do you dig out the earth from the circle I have made ; and if you do as I tell you we shall be made this night the richest persons in the world. And this is what I tell

you : do you dig on till you strike the spade on the iron door of the castle, and then whatever you hear, or whatever you see, don't speak a word for your life's sake ; for if you do we shall lose all power of getting into the castle, and your life will be in danger.' The servant went on digging, whilst the doctor stood on the brink with the Bible in his hand. At last the servant's spade struck on the iron door; and at once horrible groans and shrieks and cries were heard underground in the castle, and spirits of all sorts began to come out at the door, ready to carry away the poor servant. And now he was so terrified that he forgot his master's order, and cried out, ' Lord, have mercy on my soul !' and then one of the spirits caught hold of his leg, and would have carried him off, but the doctor put down the Bible on his head, and, keeping the book there, dragged him out of the pit with the other hand. ' But, sir,' concluded the aged labourer, ' the pit was at once closed up ; and the door, I believe, is changed, as no one has been able to find it since.'

### *Dulverton (Somerset)*

Dulverton on Exmoor in west Somerset, near the border with Devon, must have once had pixies<sup>47</sup>:

Not far from Dulverton Station, between the Minehead main road and Bury village, is a wood known as " Pixy Copse," curiously enough in proximity to an old British camp. Pixies, too, are said to sit on Comer's Gate, a favourite hunting fixture at the northern extremity of Winsford Hill, and within easy hail of Withypool. Some of the country people, 'tis said, fear to pass this spot after dark, having no desire to make the acquaintance of a race noted for its caprice, and wielding, as they suppose, supernatural power.

Fairies are often associated with hillforts and barrows. There are four well-preserved Bronze Age bowl barrows on Winsford Hill; while the "old British Camp" near Pixy Copse, which lay between the Minehead main road and Bury village, not far from Dulverton Station (actually at Brushford

to the south of Dulverton), is almost certainly Road Castle in the parish of Winsford, an Iron Age enclosure on Road Hill overlooking the valley of the river Exe<sup>48</sup>.

### *New Forest (Hampshire)*

The New Forest is in Hampshire, not far from Cranborne Chase, where Celtic place names have survived, and even closer to Rockbourne Roman villa and the hillfort of Whitsbury Castle Ditches – and it was once the home of fairies and pixies who led the New Forest ponies astray<sup>49</sup>:

Here in the Forest still dwell fairies. The mischievous sprite, Laurence, still holds men by his spell and makes them idle. If a peasant is lazy, it is proverbially said, “Laurence has got upon him,” or, “He has got a touch of Laurence.” He is still regarded with awe, and barrows are called after him. Here, too, in the Forest still lives Shakspeare’s Puck, a veritable being, who causes the Forest colts to stray, carrying out word for word Shakspeare’s description,—

“I am that merry wanderer of the night,  
When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile  
Neighing in likeness of a filly foal.”

This tricky fairy, so the Forest peasant to this hour firmly believes, inhabits the bogs, and draws people into them, making merry, and laughing at their misfortunes ... Only those who are eldest born are exempt from his spell. The proverb of “as ragged as a colt Pixey” is everywhere to be heard, and at which Drayton seems to hint in his Court of Faerie:—

“This Puck seems but a dreaming dolt,  
Still walking like a ragged colt.”

He does not, however, in the Forest, so much skim the milk, or play pranks with the chairs, but, as might be expected from the nature of the country, misleads people on the moors, turning himself into all sorts of

shapes, as Shakspeare, Spenser, and Jonson, have sung. There is scarcely a village or hamlet in the Forest district which has not its “Pixey Field,” and “Pixey Mead,” or its “Picksmoor,” and “Cold Pixey,” and “Puck Piece.” At Prior’s Acre we find Puck’s Hill, and not far from it lies the great wood of Puckpits; whilst a large barrow on Beaulieu Common is known as the Pixey’s Cave

Cold Pixie’s Cave on Beaulieu Heath, in the parish of East Boldre is a round barrow excavated in 1941/2. No burial was found, the only find of note being an amber necklace<sup>50</sup>. Beaulieu of course was the site of a Cistercian abbey dissolved in 1538.

## KING ARTHUR

### *Cadbury Castle (Somerset)*

In the Middle Ages King Arthur was associated with Winchester, but by the 16th century he came to be linked with Somerset. The Iron Age and early medieval stronghold of Cadbury Castle, in Somerset was recorded as Arthur’s Camelot in 1542 by John Leland in his Itinerary. The name ‘Camelot’ seems to have only become attached to the Arthurian legend in the late-12th century, with Chrétien de Troyes’ Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart, and has no place in British traditions (Welsh tales linked Arthur to Celliwig in Cornwall, while Geoffrey of Monmouth associated Arthur with Caerleon in south Wales). In 1586, however, it was noted by the antiquarian William Camden that locals called Cadbury Castle ‘Arthur’s Palace’, and there was an “Arthur’s Hunting Causeway” beside Cadbury Castle<sup>51</sup>.

According to legend King Arthur is not dead but asleep. The Welsh antiquary Elis Gruffudd, who died in 1552 records two versions of the legend of Arthur magically sleeping inside a hill, one ‘in the region of Gloucester’ and one where Arthur is “asleep in a cave under a hill near Glastonbury”, which is probably South Cadbury. This belief persisted into the 19th century, when a party of antiquaries were asked on their visit to

South Cadbury by an old man “Have you come to take the king out?”; other tales give the hollow Cadbury Castle iron or golden gates, as recorded in Chambers’ *Arthur of Britain* (1927)<sup>52</sup>.

## DEMON HORSES

### *Malmesbury (Wiltshire)*

John Aubrey, in his *Hypomnemata Antiquaria* (1671), has this tale of St. Aldhelm, in which the saint uses a demon horse to go swiftly to Rome<sup>53</sup>:

The Pope, hearing of his fame sent for him to preach at Rome; he had not above 2 daies warning to goe. Wherefore he conjured for a fleet spirit. Up comes a spirit he askes how fleet. resp [it replies]: as fleet as a bird in the air. Yt was not enough. Another as fleet as an arrow out of a bow, not enough either. A 3rd. as swift as thought. This would doe. He commands it to take the shape of a horse, and presently it was so; a black horse on which his great saddle and footecloth was putt.

The first thing he thought on was St Pauls steeple lead: he did kick it with his foot and asked where he was, and the spirit told him, etc. When he came to Rome the groom asked what he should give his horse. quoth he a peck of live coales. This from an old man at Malmesbury.”

A horse which eats live coals can only be a demon.

### *Batcombe (Dorset)*

Batcombe is in Dorset just to the north of Cerne Abbas, home to a Benedictine abbey until 1539, and on Batcombe Down is a stone about three feet high, evidently part of a cross, and called Cross Hand Stone. There is a legend to explain why the cross is there, which involves a pyx (a box containing the consecrated host) ... and also the Devil<sup>54</sup>:

Back in the middle ages, one dark, wild winter night, Batcombe priest was sent for to take the viaticum to a dying man, two or three miles off. Taking pyx and service-book, he sallied out with a brave heart on his

dark, lonely way over Batcombe Down, and safely reached the sick man's house. But on getting in, and producing what was needed for his ministration—where was the pyx? It was lost. He had dropped it on the way, and its fall on the turf of Batcombe Down—in the howling wind, too!—had not been heard. Back he toiled into the darkness and the storm on his almost hopeless quest. Hopeless? The easiest search ever made. Up on Batcombe Down there was a pillar of fire, reaching from heaven to earth, and steadily shining in the storm. What could this be? He struggled on faster and faster, with strange, half-formed hopes. He came near to the spot over which stood the calm beam in the gale. He saw numbers of cattle of various kinds gathered in a circle—kneeling—kneeling round the pyx.

By the 19th century there was an addition to the tale:

The priest was much astounded at what he saw, but not so much so but that he observed among the live-stock a black horse, kneeling, indeed, like the rest, but only on one knee. The priest said to this lukewarm beast, "Why don't you kneel on both knees, like the rest?" "Wouldn't kneel at all if I could help it." "Who, then, are you?" "The devil." "Why do you take the form of a horse?" "So that men may steal me, and get hung, and I get hold of them. Got three or four already."

I'm not sure why horses were considered demonic, but they were used in Iron Age rituals in Hampshire and Wiltshire – for example, at Danebury hillfort in Hampshire, and at Lidbury Camp and Battlesbury Bowl in Wiltshire.

### *The Geography of Wessex Folklore*

The fairies of Wessex – apart from the fairies of Sir Orfeo – are found close to areas where Celts survived into the 6th century or later: west Wiltshire, where Celtic place-names survived and medieval abbeys proliferated; Somerset close to the border of north Devon, where Celtic place-names also



survived; and the New Forest in Hampshire, close to Cranborne Chase in Dorset, which resisted the Anglo-Saxons in the 5th and 6th centuries and also has its fair share of Celtic place-names. Tales of King Arthur survived in Winchester, the Anglo-Saxon capital of England, and at Cadbury Castle in Somerset, the stronghold of a nameless British chief until the 6th century.

## CHAPTER 10

### *The Folklore of the Celtic Fringe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century (2) The Folklore of the West Midlands: Fairies, Mermaids, and Demon Horses*

#### THE WEST MIDLANDS

The West Midlands is defined here as the area bordering Wales, from Herefordshire to Shropshire and Cheshire, but also extending to the two neighbouring counties of Staffordshire, which borders on Shropshire, and Derbyshire, which has a border with Cheshire. It corresponds to the western half of the kingdom of Mercia, and covers areas like Derbyshire and Cheshire which are not usually included in the West Midlands.

#### THE ANGLO-SAXON KINGDOM OF MERCIA

##### *The Benty Grange Helmet*

The name Mercia is a Latinisation of Old English mierce, “border-people”, from Old English mearc “border”, referring perhaps to people living in Herefordshire, Shropshire and Cheshire, on the border between the Anglo-Saxons and the Welsh kingdom of Powys<sup>1</sup>. We can get some idea of early Mercia from the Benty Grange helmet. A barrow, not more than two feet high, with a ditch, on a farm called Benty Grange at Hartington in the Peak District of Derbyshire, was opened in 1828. It contained a single Anglo-Saxon burial including the unique Benty Grange Helmet. The helmet dates from the 6th century, and is made of seven iron bands which form the basic framework. “This framework was covered with horn plates and

strengthened by horn strips riveted to the iron bands. This is the only surviving example of a horn covered helmet from England. The helmet is decorated with a boar on top and a cross on the nose guard. The helmet was made at a time when people's beliefs were changing from paganism to Christianity and the helmet reflects this. The boar was a pagan symbol of fertility, strength and vigour and was often used as a protective symbol on helmets"<sup>2</sup>.

### *Penda of Mercia and the Beginnings of Christianity*

The first Mercian king of whom anything is known is Penda, who first entered history in 633, when, with his Welsh ally Cadwallon ap Cadfan, king of Gwynedd, he defeated and killed Edwin of Northumbria at the Battle of Hatfield Chase. Bede<sup>3</sup> calls Penda "a most warlike man of the royal race of the Mercians," who "from that time governed that nation twenty-two years with various success."

In 642, Penda defeated and killed Oswald of Northumbria at the Battle of Maserfield; Welsh sources imply that this time he was assisted by Cynddylan, the ruler of the Welsh kingdom of Powys. In 655 Penda attacked King Oswiu of Northumbria with "thirty legions, led on by most noted commanders", including Æthelhere, king of East Anglia<sup>4</sup>, and Cadfael king of Gwynedd. He besieged Oswiu at Iudeu (location unknown), where Oswiu offered him a great deal of treasure in return for peace. Then for some reason Penda and his army moved south, and Penda was killed at the Battle of Winwaed, possibly somewhere along the River Went, which rises near Featherstone in West Yorkshire, and flows into the River Don a few miles from Doncaster in South Yorkshire. Most of Penda's leaders were killed, including Æthelhere. As Bede says: "The battle was fought near the river Winwaed, which then, with the great rains, had not only filled its channel, but overflowed its banks, so that many more were drowned in the flight than destroyed by the sword."

In 653, while Penda was still king of the Mercians, the Middle Angles of the East Midlands, who were ruled by Penda's son Peada, converted to

Christianity. As Bede says of Peada<sup>5</sup>:

Being an excellent youth, and most worthy of the title and person of a king, he was by his father elevated to the throne of that nation, and came to Oswiu, king of the Northumbrians, requesting to have his daughter Alchflaed given him to wife; but could not obtain his desires unless he would embrace the faith of Christ, and be baptized, with the nation which he governed. When he heard the preaching of truth, the promise of the heavenly kingdom, and the hope of resurrection and future immortality, he declared that he would willingly become a Christian, even though he should be refused the virgin; being chiefly prevailed on to receive the faith by King Oswiu's son Alhfrith, who was his relation and friend, and had married his sister Cyneburh, the daughter of King Penda.

So Peada was baptised by Bishop Finan at the royal estate called "At the Wall" (possibly Newcastle-upon-Tyne). Peada returned home, bringing with him four priests; including Cedd and Adda, and Betti, who were English, and Diuma, who was Irish. They preached to the Middle Angles, with Penda's tacit approval:

Nor did King Penda obstruct the preaching of the word among his people, the Mercians, if any were willing to hear it; but, on the contrary, he hated and despised those whom he perceived not to perform the works of faith, when they had once received the faith, saying, "They were contemptible and wretched who did not obey their God, in whom they believed."

After Penda was killed, Oswiu ruled over the Mercians, Peada ruled over the kingdom of the Southern Mercians, "divided by the River Trent from the Northern Mercians", and Diuma was made first bishop of the Mercians and Middle Angles. However, Peada did not rule for long, for he was "very wickedly killed, by the treachery, as is said, of his wife, during the very time of celebrating Easter", just a year after the death of Penda<sup>6</sup>.

### *Early Christianity in Mercia*

The most famous early Mercian bishop was Chad, the brother of Cedd, one of the priests who brought Christianity to Mercia. Chad was probably born in Northumbria, but is likely to have come from a British background – his name apparently derives from Celtic *cad*, ‘battle, war-band’<sup>7</sup>. He studied with the Irish monk and bishop Aidan at Lindisfarne in Northumbria, some time between 635 and 651, then spent some time in Ireland.

In 664 Chad became abbot of the monastery of Lastingham in North Yorkshire. Not long after, he was ordained bishop of the Northumbrians by Wini, bishop of Winchester, and two British bishops. This ordination was judged invalid, and Chad retired to Lastingham. But a bishop was soon required in Mercia, so Chad took up an appointment as Bishop of Lichfield (Staffordshire), but died of the plague after only two and a half years, in 672.

Not long before he died, says Bede<sup>8</sup>, Chad had a sort of vision. One of the monks heard singing coming from Chad’s oratory and asked the bishop what it was. To which Chad replied: “They were angelic spirits, who came to call me to my heavenly reward, which I have always longed after, and they promised they would return seven days hence, and take me away with them.” As promised, the ‘angelic spirits’ who had sung to him, returned within seven days and took Chad away:

Chad died on the 2nd of March, and was first buried by St. Mary’s Church, but afterwards, when the church of the most holy prince of the apostles, Peter, was built, his bones were translated into it. In both which places, as a testimony of his virtue, frequent miraculous cures are wont to be wrought. And of late, a certain distracted person, who had been wandering about everywhere, arrived there in the evening, unknown or unregarded by the keepers of the place, and having rested there all the night, went out in his perfect senses the next morning, to the surprise and delight of all; thus showing that a cure had been performed on him through the goodness of God. The place of the

sepulchre is a wooden monument, made like a little house, covered, having a hole in the wall, through which those that go thither for devotion usually put in their hand and take out some of the dust, which they put into water and give to sick cattle or men to drink, upon which they are presently eased of their infirmity, and restored to health.

An abbey or monastery at Repton in Derbyshire was traditionally founded by St. David of Wales in the 6th century. In 697 Alfritha was abbess and St. Guthlac became a monk there. Two Mercian kings, Aethelbald (died 757) and Wiglaf (died 840) were buried there, as was St. Wystan, murdered in 849. It was used as a defended strongpoint by the Vikings in 874-5, during their invasion of the Midlands and northern England. Domesday does not record the abbey, which seems to justify the tradition that it did not survive the Danish occupation of Repton<sup>9</sup>.

### *The Rise and Fall of Mercia*

Mercia reached the height of its power in the 8th century under three strong kings, Æthelbald (716-757), Offa (757-796), and Coenwulf (796-821). For much of this time the Mercian capital was at Tamworth, not far from Lichfield. A royal palace existed at Tamworth in the Middle Saxon period. Evidence comes mainly from the royal charters that were signed there. These began under Offa (757-796) but reached their peak in the 840's and 850's. Offa is known to have signed a grant in 781 from "his royal palace there."<sup>10</sup> Tamworth also had a water mill. A mid 8th century Saxon horizontal water mill was identified during excavations on the south side of Bolebridge Street. Two phases of building were recorded, the first was abandoned due to erosion lowering the head of water to the driving wheel. The second phase was a substantial structure constructed of oak baulks. The lower storey of the mill, housing the main machinery, was recorded and the end of the leet, the wheel site, sluice gates and the outlet into the river were also located<sup>11</sup>.

### *St. Werburgh of Chester*

In the late 9th century large parts of east Mercia were occupied by Vikings, and by the early 10th century west Mercia had effectively become part the kingdom of Wessex. St. Werburgh was a 7th century Anglo-Saxon saint, who was initially buried in Hanbury (Staffordshire), where there was a monastery by the mid 9th century, and translated to Chester in Cheshire in the late 9th or early 10th century because of the Viking threat<sup>12</sup>. Werburgh is best known for the following miraculous story, which is found in a number of sources, including Henry of Huntingdon's 12th century History of the English<sup>13</sup>:

St Werburg lies at Chester, about whom, among the many things said of her, one is outstanding and unheard of, which I cannot avoid mentioning. For it is written that a large flock of wild geese were destroying her growing corn by feeding on it: she had them confined in a certain house, as if they were domestic geese. In the morning, when she called them, ready to send them out, she saw that one was missing. On enquiry, she heard that it had been eaten by the servants.

"Bring me," she said, "the feathers and bones of the bird that has been eaten."

When they were brought to her, this bride of the high God commanded that it should be whole and should live. And it was done. Then she instructed the geese, which were cheering and crying out at the return of their lost companion, that no other of their kind must ever, in all eternity, enter that field. They all departed in safety. And what the virgin commanded has been observed up to the present day.

This story is obviously similar to Irish animal resurrection stories, and highlights the fact that Chester probably remained in British hands until the early 7th century. There are still Celtic place-names in Cheshire, particularly in the Wirral Peninsula, which is close to Chester. Liscard, from *llys* "court (for day-to-day business)" + *carreg* "cliff", was Lisenecark in the thirteenth century when the [Old Welsh] definite article *en* probably

survived. Noctorum has *cnoc* “hill” as its first element, but its second component remains obscure. Landican, from *llan Tecan* “church of St Tecan”, probably goes back to the fifth and sixth centuries ... *Llan*, cognate with Germanic land, meant first “monastic enclosure”, then “church”, and later “village with a parish church”<sup>14</sup>.

## THE WEST MIDLANDS REGION AFTER THE NORMAN CONQUEST

### *St. Thomas de Cantilupe (Hereford)*

Hereford became a bishopric in the 7th century; the church at Hereford was constructed in the 11th century but badly damaged in 1055, and rebuilt in the 12th century. Thomas de Cantilupe was Bishop of Hereford from 1275 to 1282. A series of confrontations with the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Pecham, led in 1282 to the excommunication of Thomas, who, although in poor health, decided to lay his case before the papal court and made the long journey to Orvieto. He was well received by Pope Martin IV but developed a fever, possibly malaria, and died far from home. His bones were prepared as relics in the customary way, separating them from his flesh by boiling, and were brought back to Hereford for burial in the Lady Chapel of the cathedral. Five years later they were moved to a shrine in the north transept, and miracles, which had already been associated with them in small numbers, increased enormously, bringing numerous pilgrims to Hereford and great wealth to the cathedral treasury<sup>15</sup>.

### *St. Anne of Buxton (Derbyshire)*

St. Anne was reputed to be the mother of the Virgin Mary, and St. Anne's well in Buxton was first mentioned by William of Worcester in 1460. The well, he says, “makes many miracles, making the infirm healthy, and in winter it is warm, even as honeyed milk.” When the site was dedicated to St. Anne's is unclear; in 1461 Buxton was known as Bukston juxta Halywell and even in the sixteenth century they were usually called the Springs or Buxton Wells<sup>16</sup>.



St. Anne at Buxton is first mentioned in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* (“Church Valuation”) of 1535 as the “chapel of Buxton in the parish of Bakewell”; the Bakewell authorities were unable to supply the Commissioners of Henry VIII with the value of offerings made here to St. Anne, presumably because they fluctuated considerably. Some time after this Sir William Bassett wrote to Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII’s chief minister<sup>17</sup>:

According to my bounden duty and the tenor of your lordship’s letters lately to me directed, I have sent to your Lordship by this bearer, my brother Francis Bassett, the images of St. Anne of Buxton, and Saint Andrew of Burton-upon-Trent, which images I did take from the places where they did stand and brought them to my own house, within forty-eight hours after the contemplation of your lordship’s letters, in as sober a manner as my little and rude wits would serve me. And for that there should be no more idolatry and superstition there used, I did not only deface the tabernacles and places where they did stand, but also did take away crutches, shirts and shifts ..., being things that allure and entice the ignorant to the said offering, also giving the keepers of both places orders that no more offerings should be made in those places till the king’s pleasure and your lordship’s be further known on their behalf.

My Lord, I have locked up and sealed the baths and wells at Buxton, that none shall enter to wash there till your lordship’s pleasure be further known.

### *Dieulacres Abbey (Staffordshire)*

The Cistercian Dieulacres Abbey at Leek was founded in 1214 when Poulton Abbey in Cheshire was abandoned and the monks moved here. This new site had been given by Ranulf de Blundeville, Earl of Chester, some time after 1199. There were 7 monks in 1377, 11 in 1385 and 13 in 1538 when the abbey was dissolved<sup>18</sup>.

## TWO MEDIEVAL TALES OF FAIRIES

### *Wild Eadric and His Fairy Wife*

One of the most famous early tales involving fairies in the West Midlands is linked with a character called “Wild Eadric.” Herefordshire and Shropshire both play a part in the legend of Wild Eadric (or Edric), a landowner with holdings in both counties, who led a revolt against William the Conqueror. According to the Worcester version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*<sup>19</sup>, in 1067 “Prince Eadric and the Welsh became hostile and they attacked the castle-men in Hereford, and did them many injuries”. The English monk and historian John of Worcester, in his Chronicle, written in the first half of the 12th century, tells us a little more about Eadric, whom he calls Edric<sup>20</sup>:

There lived at this time a very powerful thegn, Edric called “the Forester,” the son of Ælfric brother of Edric Streona. Because he scorned to submit to the king, his lands were frequently ravaged by the garrison of Hereford and by Richard Fitz Scrob: but whenever they raided his territories, they lost many of their knights and men-at-arms. Therefore having summoned to his aid the princes of the Welsh, namely Bleddyn and Rhiwallon, this same Edric, about the feast of the Assumption of St. Mary [August 15, 1067], devastated Herefordshire as far as the bridge over the River Lugg and carried away much plunder.

In the original Latin “the Forester” is *silvaticus*, which can also mean “wild”; Bleddyn ap Cynfyn was king of Gwynedd in north Wales, and Rhiwallon ap Cynfyn was his brother and king of Powys in east Wales.

Another monk and historian, the Shropshire-born Anglo-Norman priest Orderic Vitalis, writing around the same time as John of Worcester, says in his Ecclesiastical History that in 1069 “the Welsh, with the men of Cheshire, laid siege to the king’s castle at Shrewsbury, aided by the townsmen under Edric Guilda, a powerful and warlike man, and other fierce English” (Guilda, or “Wild”, is glossed as *silvaticus* in Latin).

Eadric apparently submitted to King William in 1070 and later

participated in William's invasion of Scotland in 1072. Another account states that he was captured by Ranulph de Mortimer after long struggles and handed over to the king for life imprisonment, some of his lands afterwards descending to the abbey of Wigmore.

By the late 12th century, Eadric had entered into legend, as recounted in *Courtiers' Trifles* (Part II, Chapter XII)<sup>21</sup>:

A similar story is told about Edric Wilde, a so-called 'man of the woods' who was renowned for his physical strength and his gracious speech and works. He was lord of the manor of North Ledbury [Herefordshire]. One night when he was returning late from hunting, accompanied only by a boy, he lost his way. About midnight, wandering in search of the path, he came upon a great house on the edge of a wood. It was the kind of house which the English have in each parish for drinking, which they call in their language a 'guildhouse'. When he drew near, attracted by a light in the house, he looked in and saw a band of many noble women. They were most beautiful in appearance and were elegantly clad in robes of the finest linen. They were taller and more stately than our women. They moved about with an airy motion, with pleasing gestures and hushed voices. The sound they made was melodious but faint, and he could not understand their speech. The knight noticed one among them whose beauty far exceeded the others. She was more to be desired than the mistresses of kings. At the sight of her, the knight received a wound in his heart. He found it hard to endure the pain of Cupid's dart.

So Edric seized the woman who had captivated him and carried her home, where he "took his pleasure with her for three days and nights", during which time she passively submitted to him but said not a word. Finally on the fourth day she said :

"My dear one, you shall be safe and joyful, and you will prosper, until the time when you reproach me because of my sisters, from whom you

took me, or because of the place in the wood from which you carried me away. From that time onwards, your happiness will disappear. Having lost me, you will suffer many other losses ... and you will die before your time.”

Edric promised to be faithful in his love, and married the lady “in the presence of a great throng of people”. Many years passed, then one night, after returning from hunting, he could not find his wife and called for her:

When, after some delay, she arrived, he looked angrily at her and said: ‘Did your sisters keep you?’ The rest of his angry words were spoken to the empty air, for she disappeared at the mention of the word ‘sisters’.

Edric regretted his words and searched for his fairy wife, but could never find her, spending the rest of his life in “never-ending sorrow.”

### *Herla and the Fairy King*

Walter Map also tells another tale of fairies, also set in the West Midlands. Herla, says Walter, was king of the ancient Britons, and he “was led into a compact by another king, seemingly a pigmy in the lowness of his stature, which did not exceed that of an ape.”<sup>22</sup> According to the story, “this dwarf drew near, sitting on a huge goat — just such a man as Pan is pictured, with glowing face, enormous head, and a red beard so long that it touched his breast (which was brightly adorned with a dappled fawn skin), a hairy belly, and thighs which degenerated into goat-feet.” The pygmy king then addressed Herla (note that I have slightly modernised the text)<sup>23</sup>:

I, the king of many kings and chiefs and of a people numerous beyond all count, come willingly, sent from them to you, and though I am to you unknown, yet I glory in the fame which hath raised you high above other kings, since you are the best and the nearest to me in place and blood, and are moreover worthy of having me grace with high honour your wedding as a guest, when the King of the French gives his

daughter to you — an arrangement concluded without your knowledge, and lo,. his messengers come this very day. Let there be an abiding compact between us, that I shall attend your wedding, and you mine a year later to the day.

On the day of Herla's marriage, the pygmy king attended with a vast host, bringing gifts and provisions; as he left, he reminded Herla of his promise. Exactly a year later, the pygmy king reappeared and demanded that Herla should fulfil his side of the bargain<sup>24</sup>:

Herla assented, and having provided himself with the wherewithal for \*the discharge of his debt, followed where he was led. He and his guide entered a cavern in a very lofty cliff, and after a space of darkness they passed into light, seemingly not of sun or of moon but of many lamps, to the home of the pigmies — a mansion in every way glorious, like the palace, of the sun in Ovid's description. Having celebrated there the marriage, and having discharged fittingly his debt to the pigmy, Herla, with the sanction of his host, withdrew laden with gifts and with presents of horses, dogs, hawks, and all things befitting venery and falconry. The pigmy conducted his guests to the darkness and at parting gave to them a small bloodhound, to be carried in arms, strictly forbidding any one of Herla's whole company to dismount until the dog should leap forward from his bearer.

Returning to the sunlight and to his own country, Herla approached an old shepherd and asked for news of his queen:<sup>25</sup>

‘ My lord, I scarce understand thy language, since I am a Saxon and thou a Briton. But I have never heard of the name of that queen, save that men tell of one so called, a queen of the very ancient Britons, and wife of King Herla, who is reported in legends to have disappeared with a pigmy into this cliff and to have been seen nevermore on earth. The Saxons, having driven out the natives, have possessed this kingdom for full two hundred years.’ The king, who had deemed his

stay to be of three days only, could scarcely sit his horse for wonder. Some of his fellows, forsooth, heedless of the pigmy's warnings, dismounted before the descent of the dog, and were immediately changed to dust. But the king, understanding the reason for this change, prohibited, by threat of like death, any one to touch the earth before the descent of the dog. But the dog never descended.

Since then, says Walter Map<sup>26</sup>

King Herla, in endless wandering, makes mad marches with his army without stay or rest. Many have seen that army, as they declare. But finally, in the first year of the coronation of our King Henry, it ceased, so men say, to visit our kingdom frequently as in the past. And then it was seen by many Welsh sinking into the river Wye at Hereford. But from that hour that wild march ceased

Walter does not say where the story of Herla took place, but he does mention the River Wye at Hereford, which suggests that the story is set in Herefordshire. This story highlights one of the features of fairyland, which is the passing of time – Herla apparently spent a few days there, but when he returned to his land, at least two centuries had passed.

## LATER TALES OF FAIRIES

### *Rorrington (Shropshire)*

It is not known how and when Wild Edric died, but some in Shropshire believed that he was still alive, imprisoned in the lead-mines with his wife Lady Godda<sup>27</sup>:

For it is not many years since, in the West Shropshire hills, in the very neighbourhood where Edric's estates lay, and where also lay the greater number of the very few Shropshire manors retained after the Conquest by Englishmen (no doubt Edric's old friends and comrades, perhaps his kindred), there were people to be found, if there are not some now, who

believed Wild Edric to be still alive, imprisoned in the mines of that wild west country. He cannot die, they say, till all the wrong has been made right, and England has returned to the same state as it was in before the troubles of his days. Meantime he is condemned to inhabit the lead-mines as a punishment for having allowed himself to be deceived by the Conqueror's fair words into submitting to him. So there he dwells with his wife and his whole train. The miners call them the Old Men, and sometimes hear them knocking, and wherever they knock, the best lodes are to be found. Now and then they are permitted to show themselves. Whenever war is going to break out, they ride over the hills in the direction of the enemy's country, and if they appear, it is a sign that the war will be serious. Such, in substance, was the account given some years ago by a young woman from Rorrington to her mistress, who repeated it to me.

Rorrington is in the west of Shropshire close to the border with Wales, and not far from the Roman Gravels lead mine, and this is the young woman's tale:

The lady, wishing to draw out the girl's knowledge, professed not to understand whom she meant by the ' Cong-kerry,' [Conqueror] as she called him. What ! did you never hear of the Cong-kerry, ma'am ' exclaimed the maid, who, by the way, could neither read nor write. Why, he used to hang up men by the heels because they were English ! Oh, he was a bad man ! ' She declared that she had herself seen Wild Edric and his men. It was in 1853 or 1854, just before the Crimean war broke out. She was with her father, a miner, at Minsterley, and she heard the blast of a horn. Her father bade her cover her face, all but her eyes, and on no account speak, leat she should go mad. Then they all came hy ; Wild Edric himself on a white horse at the head of the band, and the Lady Godda his wife, riding at full speed over the hills. Edric had short dark curly hair and very hright black eyes. He wore a green

cap and white feather, a short green coat and cloak, a horn and a short sword hanging from his golden belt, and something zig-zagged here ‘ (touching her leg below the knee). The lady had wavy golden hair falling loosely to her waist, and round her forehead a band of white linen, with a golden ornament in it. The rest of her dress was green, and she had a short dagger at her waist. The girl watched them pass out of sight over the hills towards the north. It was the second time her father had seen them. The former time they were going southwards. And then Napoleon Bonaparte came.’

Wild Edric seems to play a similar role here to King Arthur in the medieval tale of the Butterfly Bishop of Winchester.

### *Ogof's Hole (Shropshire)*

Here are some more tales of fairies, mostly dating from the 19th century. Ogof's Hole, a cavern on the Shropshire side of Llanymynech Hill, the site of a probable Roman copper mine, was considered to be an entrance to fairyland<sup>28</sup>:

Old people tell that when they were young few dared venture to explore its mysterious passages, some of which are thought to lead directly under Llanymynech village. An old blind fiddler once wandered into them by accident, and journeyed on and on underground, playing his violin as he went, till the people in the cellars of the village inn at Llanymynech heard the strains of the instrument far in the depths below.

### *Wensley (Derbyshire)*

Wensley, in the south of the Peak District near Matlock, was a centre of lead mining in the 18th and 19th century, and here is an 1895 tale from Wensley entitled “The Little Red Hairy Man” which involves an old mine<sup>29</sup>:

Once upon a time there was a lead miner in Derbyshire who had three sons, and he was very poor. One day the eldest son said he would go



and seek his fortune, so he packed up his kit, and took something to eat with him and set off. After he had walked a long way he came to a wood, and being very tired he sat down upon a large stone by the wayside, and began to eat the bread and cheese that he had brought with him. Whilst he was eating he thought he heard a voice. So he looked about him and saw a little red man coming out of the wood covered with hair, and about the height of nine penn'orth of copper. He came close up to the eldest son, and asked for something to eat. But instead of giving him food the eldest son told him to be off, and kicked his foot out at the little man and hurt him, so that he went limping back into the wood.

Then the eldest son went on his way, and after a long time came home again as poor as he had left.

After the eldest son had returned, the second son said that he would go out and seek his fortune. When he came to the wood he sat down to rest and eat, and whilst he was eating the little red hairy man came out and begged for some food. But the second son went on eating until he had done, and threw the little man the crumbs and bits that were left. Then the little man told the second son to go and try his luck in a mine that he would find in the middle of the wood.

So the second son went to look for the mine, and when he had found it he said to himself, "Why, it's only an old worn-out mine, and I'm not going to waste my time over that." So he set off on his way, and after a long time came home again as poor as he had left.

Now by this time Jack, the youngest son, had grown up, and when the second son came home he said to his father, "I will go now and seek my fortune." So when he was ready he left home in the same way that his brothers had done. And when he came to the wood and saw the stone on the way side, he sat down on it, and pulled out his bread and cheese and began to eat, and in a few minutes he heard somebody say, "Jack, Jack." So he looked about him and saw the same little red hairy

man that his brothers had seen. The little man said he was hungry, and asked Jack to give him some of his bread and cheese, and Jack said he would and welcome. So he cut him a good lump, and told him he could have more if he wanted. Then the little man came close up to Jack and told him that he only wanted to try him to see what sort he was.

“And now,” said the little man, “ I will help thee to get thy fortune, but thou must do as I tell thee.”

So then he told Jack to go and find the old mine in the middle of the wood. So Jack went, and when he got to the mine he found the little man had got there before him.

The opening of the mine was inside an old hut, and over the pit, in the middle of the floor, was a windlass. So the little man told Jack to get into the bucket, and began to let him down. So Jack went down, and down, and down, till at last he came to the bottom, when he got out and found himself in a beautiful country.

Then the little red hairy man told him he had to set free three princesses, imprisoned in copper, silver and gold castles. Jack fell in love with the princess in the gold tower, and the little red hairy man helped him get as much gold as he wanted from the gold castle. The folklorists Jennifer Westwood and Jacqueline Simpson say<sup>30</sup> that the little red hairy man was some kind of mine spirit, as these were believed to show miners the best coal seams and veins of ore.

Wensley is not far from Arbor Low, a Neolithic henge and stone circle with a bowl barrow superimposed on the east side of the henge bank. The henge consists of a massive bank and internal quarry ditch surrounding an oval area with a diameter of around 40m by 52m<sup>31</sup>.

Within the henge are the remains of a large irregular stone circle originally comprising 41-43 upright limestone slabs. Of these, only one is still standing and several are broken so that there are now more than 50 stumps and fragments ... At the centre of the circle is a ruined stone-

setting called the cove which consisted of at least six stones believed to have been set in a rectangle. Gray excavated part of the cove and found, on the east side, within an oval arrangement of large blocks, an extended skeleton laid with its head to the south-southeast. Several metres north-east of this he found traces of another human burial, in a pit disturbed by an earlier unrecorded excavation. A further burial was found outside the circle in 1845 when Thomas Bateman partially excavated the large bowl barrow superimposed on the southeast side of the henge. This barrow, which is 21m in diameter and survives to a height of around 2.5m, was at least partly constructed from material taken from the henge bank and so, in its present form, must be of later date. However, near the centre of the barrow, on the old land surface, Bateman found a limestone cist or grave containing, in addition to the remains of a human cremation and artefacts of flint and bone, two unusual pots which are similar to Late Neolithic Peterborough ware.

Clearly Arbor Low is the sort of place where fairies might have lived, even if the little red hairy man was a mine spirit.

### *Peak Cavern (Derbyshire)*

The Peak Cavern is in the Derbyshire Peak District, and William Camden, writing in 1586, said this of the cavern<sup>32</sup>:

there is a cave or hole within the ground called, saving your reverence, The Devils Arse, that gapeth with a wide mouth and hath in it many turnings and retyring roomes, wherein, for sooth, Gervase of Tilbury, whether for want of knowing the truth, or upon a delight hee had in fabling, hath written that a Shepheard saw a verie wide and large Country with riverets and brookes running here and there through it, and huge pooles of dead and standing waters. Notwithstanding, by reason of these and such like fables, this Hole is reckoned for one of the wonders of England.

Gervase of Tilbury heard the story that Camden refers to from Robert, prior of Kenilworth; it happened when William Peveril owned Peak Castle (before 1155). One winter's day, says Gervase, William's swineherd lost a pregnant sow and searched for it in Peak Cavern. After a long journey underground he came out amid bright open fields, where harvesters were busy gathering the crops. He found his sow among the corn, now with several piglets. He spoke to the reeve of the land who allowed him to take the pigs, and he returned to Derbyshire, where it was still winter<sup>33</sup>. Peak Cavern has no prehistoric associations, but it is not far from Mam Tor, an Iron Age hillfort that was also occupied in the later Bronze Age<sup>34</sup>.

### *Cauldon Low (Staffordshire)*

Cauldon Low is a hill in the Staffordshire Moorlands, not far from Stoke-on-Trent, where a round barrow was excavated in 1849, to reveal a central rock cut grave containing an inhumation with sherds of Romano-British or Anglo-Saxon pottery<sup>35</sup>. According to Mary Howitt, writing in 1847, there were fairies on Cauldon Low, as revealed in "The Fairies of the Caldon Low"<sup>36</sup>:

"Oh I tell me all, my Mary,  
All, all that ever you know ;  
For you must have seen the fairies,  
Last night, on the Caldon Low."  
"Then take me on your knee, mother;  
And listen, mother of mine.  
A hundred fairies danced last night,  
And the harpers they were nine."

### *Alderley Edge (Cheshire)*

Alderley Edge, near Macclesfield in the northeast of Cheshire, not far from the border with Derbyshire, is the oldest known metal-mining site in England, with activity dating from the Early Bronze Age<sup>37</sup>. So it is not surprising that there is a Cheshire legend, recorded in 1869, known as the

“Iron Gates” or the “Wizard of Alderley Edge” which involves an underground world<sup>38</sup>.

A farmer from Mobberley, mounted on a milk-white horse, was crossing the heathy heights of Alderley on his way to Macclesfield, his errand being to sell the animal on which he rode. He had reached a spot now known as the ‘Thieves’ Hole,’ and was thinking, as he slowly rode along, upon the profitable bargain which he hoped to make, when he was startled by the sudden appearance of an old man, tall, and somewhat strangely clad in a dark and flowing garment. The old man, in a commanding tone, bade him stop; told him that he knew the errand upon which he was bent, and tendered him a price for his horse, which the farmer refused, not thinking it sufficient. ‘Go, then, on to Macclesfield,’ said the old man, ‘but mark my words, you will not sell the horse; no purchaser will appear. Should you find my words come true, meet me here this evening, and I will buy your horse.’

So the farmer went to Macclesfield and, as predicted, did not sell his horse. On his way home he saw the mysterious old man, seated on a stone. The old man rose from his seat and stood beside him:

“Follow me,” he said, and silently led the way by the Seven Firs, the Golden Stone by Stormy Point, and Saddle Bole. They passed still silently on, when, just as the wondering farmer was beginning to think he would rather not go any further, the old man, abruptly paused, and the horseman fancied he heard a horse’s neigh underground. It was repeated, and stretching forth his arm, the old man (who now seemed of more than mortal stature to the affrighted rider) touched the rock with a wand, and immediately there arose a ponderous pair of iron gates. With a sound like thunder the gates flew open; the horse reared bolt upright; the terrified farmer fell on his knees, and prayed the wondrous man to spare his life. “Fear nothing,” quoth the wizard, “but enter boldly, and behold the sight which no mortal eye has ever yet looked upon.” They

went into the cave. In a long succession of caverns, the farmer saw a countless number of men and horses, the latter all milk-white, fast asleep. In the innermost cavern heaps of treasure were piled up on the ground. From these glittering heaps the old man bade the farmer take the price he desired for his horse. Then again, the old man spoke : — “You see these men and horses ; the number was not complete, your horse was wanted to make it so. Remember my words— there will come a day when these men and horses, awakening from their enchanted slumber, will descend into the plain, decide the fate of a great battle, and save their country. This shall be when George the son of George shall reign. Go home in safety ; leave your horse with me. No harm will befall you, but henceforward no mortal eye will ever look upon the ‘Iron Gates’ Begone !”

This story goes back to at least the 18th century<sup>39</sup>, when George I (1714-1727), was succeeded by George II (1727-1760), who was followed by George III (1760-1820), who was in turn succeeded by George IV (1720-1730). By 1838 the sleeping men in the cave were identified with King Arthur and his knights. The novelist Elizabeth Gaskell, in a letter to Mary Howitt, says: “if you were on Alderley Edge, the hill between Cheshire and Derbyshire, could I not point out to you the very entrance to the cave where King Arthur and his knights lie sleeping in their golden armour till the day when England’s peril shall summon them to her rescue.”<sup>40</sup>

## MERMAIDS

### *Kinder Scout (Derbyshire)*

Kinder Scout is a moorland plateau in the Peak District, and S.O. Addy, writing in 1895, mentions the Mermaid’s Pool there<sup>41</sup>:

On Kinder Scout, in the High Peak of Derbyshire, is a pool called “the Mermaid’s Pool.” It is said that people visit the pool on Easter-eve at midnight, when the mermaid appears and tries to allure her visitors into

the water. It is said that several persons have lost their lives in this way, for if the visitor refuses to comply with her request she drags him under the water.

### *Leek (Staffordshire Peak District)*

In Staffordshire, 6 miles northwest of Leek, the site of the medieval Dieulacres Abbey, there is a pool known in the 17th century as “the Black Mere of Morridge”, but now known as “Blakemere.” Dr John Plot, in his *Natural History of Staffordshire* (1686), judged its water to be<sup>42</sup>

nothing more than such as those in the peat-pits; though it be confidently reported that no Cattle will drink of it, no bird light on it, or fly over it; all which are as false as that it is bottomlesse; it being found upon measure scarce four yards in the deepest place, my Horse also drinking when I was there as freely of it as I ever saw Him at any other place, and the fowle so far from declining to fly over it, that I spake with several that had seen Geese upon it; so that I take this to be as good as the rest, notwithstanding the vulgar disrepute it lyes under.

By the 19th century it had become associated with a mermaid<sup>43</sup>:

there has for generations been a firmly-rooted belief in the minds of the people about there that the place is the abode of a Mermaid, who does her best (and now and then has succeeded) to lure wayfarers and loiterers to destruction.

Mermaids are like aquatic fairies, and are much more sinister than the fairies of the West Midlands.

### *Jack O' Kent and His Demon Horses*

The legendary Jack o' Kent is said to have lived in the Herefordshire/Monmouthshire borders at an unspecified medieval date (his name comes from the village of Kentchurch in Herefordshire, not the county of Kent). He first appears in print in Anthony Munday's play *John a Kent and John a Cumber* which is dated around 1590, in which he appears

as an old hermit with supernatural powers. Many of the myths of John of Kent revolve around his outwitting the devil, having sold his soul to the devil as a young boy in order to have supernatural power or power to use the devil as his servant.

Sometimes his power was used for public good. One story is associated with a bridge over the Monnow between Kentchurch and Grosmont in the south of Herefordshire near the border with Monmouthshire, Wales. “The tale is told that with the help of the devil the bridge was built in a single night, but the pact included a promise that the Devil could have the soul of the first to cross it. With the bridge complete, the devil was impatient that he should have his reward for keeping his side of the bargain before he had to disappear as daylight approached. He encouraged Jack to be the first to cross his new bridge. But, not to be outwitted, spotting a starving dog nearby, Jack tempted it with a bone. As it came bounding to him, Jack threw the bone across the bridge and the dog chased after it. As the cock crowed the devil had to accept his only reward for his effort would be the hapless dog.”<sup>44</sup>

Jack o’ Kent is fabled to have kept great horses with magical powers of flight in the stables at Kentchurch Court, a country house incorporating the gateway and tower of a 14th century fortified house or castle<sup>45</sup>. “The story goes that one day he set off at dawn with a mince pie to take to the King in London. He got to London in time for breakfast with the pie still hot – though he had lost his garter en route, caught on the weathervane of a church as he bounded over it”<sup>46</sup>. Jack o’Kent’s horses with magical powers of flight are similar to the demon horse that took St. Aldhelm to Rome and fed on live coals.

## THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE SUPERNATURAL IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

Fairies and the more frightening mermaids seem to be concentrated in the counties bordering Wales, and also in the Peak District, both in Derbyshire



and Staffordshire. Mermaids obviously are associated with pools, but fairies in the West Midlands often live in old mines.

# CHAPTER 11

## *The Folklore of Anglo-Saxon and Viking England from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* *(1)The Folklore of Northern England: Fairies, Bogles, Boggarts, Supernatural Dogs, and King Arthur*

### THE ANGLO-SAXON KINGDOM OF NORTHUMBRIA

#### *The Beginnings of Christianity in Northumbria*

Anglo-Saxons began settling in the northeast of England in the 5th century, with early cemeteries at Sancton in East Yorkshire and West Heslerton in North Yorkshire. By the early 7th century the Anglo-Saxons of northeast England had formed the kingdom of Northumbria. Thanks to Bede, a monk and historian at the Northumbrian twin monasteries of Monkwearmouth, and Jarrow, we know a good deal about Northumbria in the 7th and early 8th centuries. Monkwearmouth on the River Wear in Sunderland, not far from the Roman fort at Chester-le-Street, was founded by Benedict Biscop in 674 and destroyed by the Danes in the 9th century<sup>1</sup>. Jarrow on the River Tyne was founded in 681 AD by St Benedict Biscop and King Egfrid of Northumbria. Bede, died there in 735. It was raided by the Vikings in 794 and in about 870 it was abandoned after being destroyed by fire. Bede's remains were transported to Durham in 1022<sup>2</sup>.

The first Christian king of Northumbria was Edwin, who converted to Christianity in 627 AD. Edwin was baptised by the Roman missionary Paulinus in a specially constructed timber church in the old Roman city of York. Then Paulinus spent thirty-six days in Yeavering, Northumberland (the site of an Anglo-Saxon palace), baptising people in the River Glen,

after which he moved on to the old Roman town of Catterick in North Yorkshire, baptising people in the River Swale.

Edwin did not long survive his conversion to Christianity: in 633 he was killed by Penda of Mercia and Cadwallon ap Cadfan of Gwynedd at the Battle of Hatfield Chase, near Doncaster. Edwin was succeeded as king of Bernicia by Eanfrith, son of the former king Aethelfrith, who was killed by Cadwallon ap Cadfan in 634. Eanfrith in turn was succeeded as king by his brother Oswald, who led an army against Cadwallon and defeated and killed him at the Battle of Heavenfield, near Hexham.

### *St. Oswald, King and Martyr*

Like his predecessor Edwin, Oswald was killed fighting against Penda of Mercia, at the Battle of Maserfield (possibly Oswestry in Shropshire) in 642. According to Bede<sup>3</sup>, Oswald died a pious and bloody death. As he died,

he prayed to God for the souls of his army. Whence it is proverbially said, “Lord, have mercy on their souls, said Oswald, as he fell to the ground.” His bones, therefore, were translated to the monastery which we have mentioned, and buried therein: but the king that slew him commanded his head, hands, and arms to be cut off from the body, and set upon stakes. But his successor in the throne, Oswiu, coming thither the next year with his army, took them down, and buried his head in the church of Lindisfarne, and the hands and arms in his royal city

The royal city, which ‘has taken its name from Bebbra, one of its former queens’ (Book 3, Chapter 6), is Bamburgh in Northumberland. In the 7th century Lindisfarne, or Holy Island, near Bamburgh became the site of an Anglo-Saxon monastery, founded by King Oswald of Northumbria, with the Irish monk Aidan as the first abbot. Recent excavations on Lindisfarne have found the remains of a church which may date from the 7th century. The building, 16 metres long and 7 metres wide, “stood on an exposed rocky promontory, often buffeted by storms and high winds, and yet facing

directly towards Bamburgh” and the royal palace. The church “was constructed just three metres from the cliff edge, in a location known in the Anglo-Saxon period simply as “the precipice”, and was built of white sandstone that would have reflected sunlight, giving the impression that it was quite literally radiating the purest white light. The gleaming building, perched above its 66 foot high precipice, “would have been visible from the royal palace, four miles away, as a glistening white structure surrounded by sea”<sup>4</sup>.

After his death at Maserfield, Oswald soon came to be venerated as a saint, as Bede makes clear<sup>5</sup>:

How great his faith was towards God, and how remarkable his devotion, has been made evident by miracles since his death; for, in the place where he was killed by the pagans, fighting for his country, infirm men and cattle are healed to this day. Whereupon many took up the very dust of the place where his body fell, and putting it into water, did much good with it to their friends who were sick. This custom came so much into use, that the earth being carried away by degrees, there remained a hole as deep as the height of a man. Nor is it to be wondered that the sick should be healed in the place where he died; for, whilst he lived, he never ceased to provide for the poor and infirm, and to bestow alms on them, and assist them.

### *St. Cuthbert of Lindisfarne (Northumberland)*

Bede also mentions several other Northumbrian saints, including Cuthbert, John of Beverley and Hilda of Whitby. Cuthbert was Bishop of Lindisfarne (Northumberland) from 684 to 687, but before he became bishop, says Bede<sup>6</sup>, Cuthbert had lived the life of a hermit: “[he] had for many years led a solitary life, in great continence of body and mind, in a very small island, called Farne, distant almost nine miles from [Lindisfarne]’.

Bede describes Cuthbert’s death and sanctity in the following terms<sup>7</sup>:

In order to show with how much glory the man of God, Cuthbert, lived

after death, his holy life having been before his death signalled by frequent miracles; when he had been buried eleven years, Divine Providence put it into the minds of the brethren to take up his bones, expecting, as is usual with dead bodies, to find all the flesh consumed and reduced to ashes, and the rest dried up, and intending to put the same into a new coffin, and to lay them in the same place, but above the pavement, for the honour due to him. They acquainted Bishop Edbert with their design, and he consented to it, and ordered that the same should be done on the anniversary of his burial. They did so, and opening the grave, found all the body whole, as if it had been alive, and the joints pliable, more like one asleep than a dead person; besides, all the vestments the body had on were not only found, but wonderful for their freshness and gloss.

St Cuthbert was an Anglo-Saxon saint from Northumbria, but he was educated at the Irish monastery of Melrose in the Scottish borders, which may explain the following story. Once he was staying at the monastery of St Abb's Head in Berwickshire, on the southeast coast of Scotland. While he was there, he used to go out alone at night, and one night a brother of the monastery followed him<sup>8</sup>:

when he left the monastery,[he] went down to the sea, which flows beneath, and going into it, until the water reached his neck and arms, spent the night in praising God. When the dawn of day approached, he came out of the water, and, falling on his knees, began to pray again. Whilst he was doing this, two quadrupeds, called otters, came up from the sea, and, lying down before him on the sand, breathed upon his feet, and wiped them with their hair after which, having received his blessing, they returned to their native element.

This story of course is typical of Celtic saints rather than Anglo-Saxon ones, so it is not surprising that a number of Celtic place-names have survived in northeast England, especially in Northumberland. Yeavering is

the place where a large number of people were baptised by Paulinus, and Bede calls Yeavinger Ad Gefrin – Gefrin is thought to be related to Welsh *gafr* “goat”, plus *bryn* “hill”). Other Celtic place-names in Northumberland include Kielder in the west of Northumberland close to the Scottish border (related to Welsh *caled* “hard”, and *dwfr* “water”); the river Rede, also in the west of Northumberland (related to Welsh *rhedeg*, “run”); and the river Breamish (related to Welsh *brefu*, “bellow, roar”, and found also in the Roman fort of Bremenium, at Rochester in Northumberland)<sup>9</sup>. Cuthbert was educated at Melrose in the Scottish Borders, and the name Melrose is first recorded as Mailros “Bare Peninsula”, related to Welsh *moel* “bald” and *rhos* “moorland.”

### *St. John of Beverley (East Yorkshire)*

John of Beverley was Bishop of Hexham and later York in the late 7th and early 8th century. According to Bede<sup>10</sup>, John displayed his miraculous powers when he visited the nunnery at Watton, between Beverley and Driffield, East Yorkshire, where he performed a miracle by curing one of the nuns (the story was told to Bede by a priest called Berthun who was accompanying John):

the bishop stood and said a prayer over her, and having given his blessing, went out. Afterwards, as we were sitting at table, some one came in and called me out, saying, ‘Coenberg’ (that was the virgin’s name) ‘desires you will immediately go back to her.’ I did so, and entering the house, perceived her countenance more cheerful, and like one in perfect health. Having seated myself down by her, she said, ‘Would you like me to call for something to drink?’ – ‘Yes,’ said I, ‘and am very glad if you can.’ When the cup was brought, and we had both drunk, she said, ‘As soon as the bishop had said the prayer, given me his blessing, and gone out, I immediately began to mend; and though I have not yet recovered my former strength, yet all the pain is quite gone from my arm, where it was most intense, and from all my body, as if

the bishop had carried it away with him; though the swelling of the arm still seems to remain.’

John died in 721, and was buried in the monastery at Beverley (East Yorkshire).

### *St. Hilda of Whitby (North Yorkshire)*

The monastery at Whitby in North Yorkshire stands on the East Cliff overlooking the North Sea above the town of Whitby. It was founded in 657 AD by St. Hilda, and recently an Anglo-Saxon cemetery has been excavated there. The cemetery was in use for a long period of time and showed some intercutting of the graves. An Anglo-Saxon coin called a sceatta dating to 700-740 AD from a late grave and the ritual use of quartz pebbles, typical of Celtic monastic practice (white quartz pebbles were found in graves at Llandough in south Wales), suggest an early date for the cemetery<sup>11</sup>.

After her death in 680, Hilda, abbess of Whitby, was venerated as a saint. Bede reports a vision experienced by a nun at Hackness<sup>12</sup>:

It is also reported, that her death was, in a vision, made known the same night to one of the holy virgins who loved her most passionately, in the same monastery where the said servant of God died. This nun saw her soul ascend to heaven in the company of angels; and this she declared, the very same hour that it happened, to those servants of Christ that were with her; and awakened them to pray for her soul, even before the rest of the congregation had heard of her death. The truth of which was known to the whole monastery in the morning. This same nun was at that time with some other servants of Christ, in the remotest part of the monastery, where the women newly converted were wont to be upon trial, till they were regularly instructed, and taken into the society of the congregation.

Hackness is on the North York Moors near Scarborough, and the only signs

of an early monastery are a 7th-8th century grave marker and a 7th-9th century cross in St. Peter's church, Hackness. Hackness was not the only early monastery on or near the North Yorks Moors: Lastingham was on the southern edge of the Moors, and Crayke in North Yorkshire lies at the foot of the Howardian Hills, which separate the Vale of York from the North York Moors. In 685 Cuthbert, bishop of Lindisfarne, founded a monastery there. Nothing remains of the monastery but a cemetery, with inhumations aligned roughly east west; samples of the bones provided a radiocarbon date of between 630-860 AD<sup>13</sup>. Crayke is a Celtic name related to Welsh *craig* "rock, boulder"<sup>14</sup>, and is one of the few surviving Celtic names in Yorkshire.

### *The Northumbrian Period in Southern Scotland*

By the 8th century the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria controlled southeast Scotland as far the Firth of Forth, and parts of Dumfries and Galloway in the southwest of Scotland. We know from Bede<sup>15</sup> that there was a nunnery at Colodaesburg, that is, St Abb's Head in the Scottish Borders, established by Æbbe, the aunt of King Ecgfrith. Today Kirk Hill at St Abb's Head is the site of the ruined St Abb's Kirk, first mentioned in 1372. "Limited excavations were carried out here in an attempt to locate the early fortification implied in the 7th century place name Colodaesburg. At Kirk Hill a cliff-edge site of some 3ha had been enclosed by either a double palisade or two successive palisades. This was overlaid by a massive turf rampart, with a footing of dressed blocks." There were no closely datable stratified finds, but the wickerwork of the palisade was radiocarbon dated to AD 630-770. "This may imply an Anglian construction, but in a British tradition. The turf rampart is later still, and may be the monastic vallum of St Aebbe's monastery"<sup>16</sup>.

A monastery was founded at Old Melrose, near Newstead Roman fort, by monks from Iona during the episcopate of Aidan of Lindisfarne (Northumberland) between 635 and 651; "Drythelm, an ascetic, became a monk in a separate dwelling at Melrose at the end of the 7th century. The



monastery was burned down by Kenneth MacAlpin in 839, but according to a 12th century account which incorporates earlier source material, the monastery survived in 854 as a foundation pertaining to the bishops of Lindisfarne ... The monastery was deserted in 1074 when an attempt by Aldwin of Jarrow to restore it for Benedictine monks failed. It was succeeded by a chapel dedicated to St Cuthbert”<sup>17</sup>.

There was an early British monastery at Whithorn in Dumfries and Galloway. but by the early 8th century this was under Northumbrian control. The history of Northumbrian Whithorn is complex, as excavations have shown. The early Christian site included two shrines on either side of a paved road. “The eastern shrine was a circular space variously defined by a ditch, a kerb, paving and graves. It overlay the remains of an earlier roundhouse, and was perhaps intended to commemorate the building or more probably a revered inhabitant. A massive cist close to the centre of the eastern shrine contained vestigial remains of two bodies apparently representing a ‘special’ burial.” The northern shrine consisted of a platform cut into the slope and approached by stone stairs. A regular setting of four timber or stone pillars at the centre of the platform subsequently became the focus of the Northumbrian church, constructed in the late 7th or early 8th century. To the east of the church was a chapel with stained-glass windows which contained “four burials, three in wooden coffins with iron fittings. To the east of the burial chapel was “a children’s graveyard with some 45 burials, all under 10 years old”<sup>18</sup>.

Northumbrian saints’ cults were focused on the tomb of the saint and his or her earthly remains, and were in all likelihood based on Gaulish models like the cult of St Martin. By the 8th century the cult of Ninian had become a tomb cult. The *Miracula Nynie Episcopi*, written at Whithorn in the last quarter of the 8th century, describes several miracles at the tomb of St Ninian: a paralytic was restored to health, a man with leprosy was cleansed of his disease, a woman had her sight restored, and a priest called Plecgils (an Anglo-Saxon name) had a vision of Christ<sup>19</sup>. What was once a 6th

century British cult had been transformed into an 8th century Anglo-Saxon cult.

### *The End of the Kingdom of Northumbria*

The Vikings captured York in 866, and York was under Scandinavian control until 954, except for short periods when the English managed to regain the city. The Viking kingdom of York controlled Yorkshire but did not include Northumbria north of the Tees, where two separate but linked powers emerged: the ecclesiastical liberty of St. Cuthbert, based at Chester-le-Street in County Durham, then the seat of the bishops of Northumbria, and (after 900) a dynasty of earls ruling from Bamburgh in Northumberland<sup>20</sup>.

Chester-le-Street became the seat of a bishop between 883-995 after the monks fled Lindisfarne in the face of the Viking conquest. St. Mary and St. Cuthberts's church stands on the site of the cathedral, and "a number of Dark Age stones from the church fabric formerly stood in the porch; the finest of these disappeared around 1882. The largest was the socket stone of a cross, now in the room above the anchorage [the anchorites' dwelling]. The remaining stones were four portions of decorated cross shafts and ten fragments of carved stones, including part of a sundial in the Parochial Institute." At the time of the Norman Conquest the church "probably consisted of a nave formed by the late 9th-10th century cathedral proper, with a chancel built circa 1056"<sup>21</sup>.

The most distinctive contribution of the Danes to Anglo-Saxon culture were the so-called hogback stones. Hogback stones are carved stones shaped like Viking longhouses<sup>22</sup>.

They originated in the first half of the 10th century in areas of northern England that had been settled by Scandinavians. Hogbacks later spread to Scotland and there are single examples from Ireland and Wales. Hogbacks are decorated with interlace patterns, animals and stylized roof tiles. They often have clasping beasts at each end. Despite the fact

that some earlier hogbacks have pagan imagery, the fact that they are found in churchyards indicates that they were made for wealthy Christian Scandinavians. It is usually assumed that hogbacks were placed as grave covers, but this is uncertain as no graves have been found in association with these monuments.

One of the largest collection of hogback stones in England is at St. Thomas' church at Brompton near Northallerton in North Yorkshire, some with muzzled bear end-beasts, some decorated with shingles. This is not the full number from Brompton, since six hogbacks were purchased by Canon Greenwell in the 19th century and installed in the Monk's Dormitory at Durham Cathedral<sup>23</sup>.

In 995, faced with another Danish invasion, the community of St Cuthbert arrived at Durham with the saint's body, after spending a century at Chester-le-Street. They may have stayed at the Anglo-Saxon settlement of Elvet, first mentioned in the 8th century, before settling on the peninsula. The Community erected a temporary shelter for the saint's body while a timber church was built. This remained in use until replaced by a stone church in 998<sup>24</sup>.

### *Cumbria and the Scottish Kingdom of Strathclyde*

The name Cumbria derives from the word *Cymry*, which evolved in the late Roman period and originally meant "inhabitants of the same *bro* (local area)". The term was borrowed into English as Cumbras no later than the 7th century, and so it is likely that the ruling dynasty of Dumbarton/Strathclyde considered themselves to be Cymry as early as the 7th century.

Strathclyde began expanding into Cumbria in the 10th century: according to the Life of St. Cathroe of Metz, written between 971-976, ) the terra Cumbrorum ("land of the Cumbrians") was ruled by king Douenaldus (Dyfnwal) of Strathclyde. The kingdom name "Strathclyde" first appears in texts of English and Irish origin during the 870s; for example,

Strecledwalas ('Strathclyde Britons') are mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 875. In contrast, Cumbrian terminology is first attested in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for 945: "In this year King Edmund ravaged all Cumbra land and granted it to Máel Coluim, king of the Scots [that is, Strathclyde], on condition that he should be his ally both on sea and on land"<sup>25</sup>.

It is likely that Strathclyde extended as far south as the River Eamont, a tributary of the River Eden which flows to the south of Penrith. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reports that in 927 the English King Athelstan had a meeting at Eamont Bridge, to the south of Penrith, with Constantin of Alba (eastern Scotland north of the Forth), Hywel Dda, the king of Wales, Ealdred of Bamburgh, and Owain of Gwent. In contrast William of Malmesbury, writing in 1125, designated Owain rex Cumbrorum ("king of the Cumbrians")<sup>26</sup>.

The name Penrith is Celtic, possibly derived from *pen* "head" and *rhyd* "ford." Other Celtic names in Cumbria include Blencathra, a hill in the Lake District, possibly from *blain* "summit" and *cadeir* "seat"; Cardurnock, from *caer* "fort" and *dwrn* "fist", meaning, fist-sized pebbles, as at Dornock in Dumfries and Galloway; Culgaith, from *cil* "corner" and *coed* "wood"; and Penruddock, from *pen* "hill" and *rhudd* "red."<sup>27</sup>

The area of Cumbria occupied by Strathclyde retained association with Cumbrian kings in early modern times: for example, Owain (the name of two kings of Strathclyde) was linked with Castle Hewin and the Giant's Grave at Penrith. Castle Hewin is in Hesket, between Carlisle and Penrith. This apparent castle was recorded as ruined by Leyland in 1553, and also recorded by Hutchinson in 1794. The foundations of Castle Hewen in 1794 were in places 8 feet thick, and one building was 233 feet by 147 feet. It was excavated in 1978-9 by Tom Clare, but the only finds were Romano-British. A round cairn containing a cremation and Viking hoard comprising a sword, spears, axe, bridle bit, shield, sickle, razor, whetstone and fragment of a millstone was discovered at Hesket in 1822<sup>28</sup>.

The Giant's Grave, the legendary tomb of Owain, sits in the churchyard of St. Andrew's church in Penrith. It consists of two crosses and four hogback stones. The eastern cross, which rests in a modern socket, is dated by Collingwood to around 1000 AD and the western to around 950. The hog-backs are 10th/11th century. A third Anglian cross in the churchyard is known as The Giant's Thumb, and is dated to the second quarter of the 10th century<sup>29</sup>.

## LATER MEDIEVAL NORTHERN ENGLAND

### *North Yorkshire*

St. Hilda's monastery at Whitby was refounded as a Benedictine Priory by 1077, but lapsed, and then again as a Benedictine Abbey by 1109. In the late Middle Ages St. Hilda became associated with the ammonites (fossilized marine molluscs) of Whitby. The geological formation there is the Lias, and in certain zones of this deposit large numbers of the fossil cephalopods, known as ammonites occur. The old idea was that these were petrified snakes, turned into stone by the patron saint of Whitby, St. Hilda. The legend is first recorded in the *Britannia* of William Camden (1551-1623)<sup>30</sup>, and is referred to in Sir Walter Scott's *Marmion*, published in 1808.

Old Mulgrave Castle at Lythe near Whitby is a 12th century castle with 13th century additions including a gatehouse and late 16th century alterations, surrounded by double ditch. It was dismantled in 1647 and succeeded by Mulgrave Castle, a country house constructed around 1730 with additions of 1786. During the late 18th or early 19th century the house was embattled by William Atkinson who added the vaulted hall and two towers as well as various turrets and walls<sup>31</sup>.

Byland Abbey at Coxwold on the North Yorks Moors, not far from Boltby Scar hillfort and from the ruined Anglo-Saxon monastery at Crayke, was originally founded at Calder in Cumbria in 1134 as a daughter house of the Savigniac Furness Abbey, but the monks fled Calder in 1138, and after temporary homes at Hood, Old Byland and Stocking – where in 1147 they

were received into the Cistercian order along with the rest of the Savigniac congregation – finally settled at Byland<sup>32</sup>.

Byland was not the only abbey on the North York Moors. Rievaulx (“Rye Valley”) Abbey on the North York Moors, not far from Byland Abbey, was founded in 1131 by Walter Espec. Because of the site’s topography the church and the rest of the abbey was orientated north-south. It was intended to be a Cistercian mission centre from which Cistercian colonies were sent out to found daughter houses throughout the north of England and Scotland. The abbey underwent expansion from 1145-65, with further building in the late 12th century (for example in the refectory area). It reached the peak of its power around 1200, but costly building programmes in the first half of the 13th century (for example the addition of the presbytery) left the abbey heavily in debt. There is also evidence that the economic output of the Abbey, which was heavily dependant on wool production, suffered in the late 13th century, partly due to epidemics amongst the estate’s flocks of sheep. Some further smaller alterations including the sacristy were made in the 14th century, but in the 15th century parts of the abbey were demolished, indicating that it had declined in numbers as well as wealth. By 1538 when the abbey was suppressed during the Reformation, there were only 22-23 monks and just over 100 lay people, whereas there had been 140 monks and over 500 lay brothers during St Aelred’s charismatic abbacy in the 1160s<sup>33</sup>.

Aelred was never formally canonised but he was popularly venerated as a saint and his cult was approved by the Cistercian Order; his feast was celebrated from 1476. However, knowledge of his cult remains hazy. Following his death in 1167, Aelred was buried in the magnificent chapter-house at Rievaulx Abbey, which he himself had constructed. In the early 13th century, his splendid shrine was translated to the newly modelled east end of the abbey church; the exact date that this occurred is not known. It is thought that the rebuilding of Rievaulx’s presbytery was undertaken specifically to provide a fitting resting place for Aelred’s remains. The

shrine was given a prominent place and was raised behind the High Altar in the second bay of the extension. Its position is known from an inventory taken around 1539, at the time of the Suppression. Aelred's cult was clearly popular amongst the locals in the sixteenth century: in his will of February 1525-6, John Rogerson of Rievaulx left a pair of beads to Aelred's shrine. John Leland wrote in 1538: "I saw his tomb decorated with gold and silver in the church of the monastery of Rievaulx."<sup>34</sup>.

### *Durham*

The main body of Durham Cathedral was constructed between 1093 and 1130, and the Galilee chapel was built in 1189. In 1104 Cuthbert's tomb was opened again and his relics were translated to new shrine behind the altar of the recently completed cathedral. When the casket was opened, a small book of the Gospel of John measuring only three-and-a-half by five inches, was found. Also recovered much later were a set of vestments of 909-916, made of Byzantine silk, with a stole and decoration in extremely rare Anglo Saxon embroidery; these had been deposited in his tomb by King Aethelstan (927-939) on a pilgrimage while Cuthbert's shrine was at Chester-le-Street<sup>35</sup>.

When the tomb was opened, the body of Cuthbert was found to be still uncorrupt. The translation of 1104 and the verification of incorruption gave an immense stimulus to the cult, which spread over much of England and Scotland. No fewer than 135 churches are dedicated to Cuthbert in England, besides seventeen in Scotland<sup>36</sup>.

### *Northumberland*

In the second half of the 12th century, the Benedictine monk Reginald of Durham wrote a book (*Libellus*, or "Little Book") in which he recorded a large number of St. Cuthbert's miracles. One of these miracles occurs at Bellingham on the River Tyne in Northumberland, not far from Coventina's Well At Carrawburgh Roman fort, and is summarized here<sup>37</sup>:

A poor, pious man called Sproich, employed by Almoner of Durham to

build bridges over Tyne at Bellingham, has a daughter named Ede who is making a dress on the eve of St Laurence's day and is warned by her mother to stop. She continues and her left hand becomes paralysed. They take her to the local church dedicated to Cuthbert, give her water from the well and spend the night in the church. Cuthbert appears and touches her hand, which relaxes slightly. It is cured when, as the priest Samuel suggests, she repeats the Lords Prayer and an invocation nine times. Cuthbert and Laurence cooperate here. The Priest and the village witness

The present church of St. Cuthbert in Bellingham dates from the 13th century, and St. Cuthbert's or Cuddy's Well still stands outside the churchyard wall. Today, the water is contained in a picturesque Georgian [18th/19th century] pant with its ever flowing spout directing the water down through a grill and away to the River Tyne<sup>38</sup> (the term pant refers to the pan or trough for collecting water; a pant is technically not a well but a cistern).

### *Lancashire*

Sawley Abbey on the River Ribble was founded in 1146 on land given by William, third Lord Percy. The Percys, Northumberland's greatest family, remained patrons of the abbey for much of its existence. The help of these wealthy benefactors proved invaluable in the 1280s when it seemed likely that the monks would abandon the site: they claimed that poor harvests, marshy ground and the inhospitable climate made life at Sawley untenable. In response, Maud de Percy, Countess of Warwick, gave valuable lands and churches at Rimington (near Barnoldswick), Ilkley, Gargrave and Tadcaster. With this new endowment the monks stayed at Sawley. Their problems, though, did not disappear. In 1296 Stanlaw Abbey in Cheshire was refounded at Whalley on the River Calder (a tributary of the Ribble), nine miles from Sawley, and the two Cistercian houses immediately quarrelled. Their lands adjoined and there were disputes over grain supplies and fishing



rights in the river Ribble. The feuding officially ended in 1305, but the monks of Sawley, the senior foundation, continued to feel aggrieved. Sawley was considerably poorer than Whalley: it was impoverished by litigation, the “cruel and inhuman spoliation” that accompanied Scottish raids about 1320, and the expense of providing board and lodging to travellers – unlike many Cistercian houses it lay on a busy main road<sup>39</sup>.

## THE MEDIEVAL FOLKLORE OF NORTHERN ENGLAND

### *Fairies in East Yorkshire*

Willy Howe is a very large round barrow at Thwing in East Yorkshire, which was associated with an underground realm by the 12th century priest and historian William of Newburgh<sup>40</sup>:

In the province of the Deiri, also, not far from the place of my nativity, an extraordinary event occurred, which I have known from my childhood. There is a village, some miles distant from the Eastern Ocean, near which those famous waters, commonly called Gipse, spring from the ground at various sources (not constantly, indeed, but every alternate year), and, forming a considerable current, glide over the low lands into the sea: it is a good sign when these streams are dried up, for their flowing is said unquestionably to portend the disaster of a future scarcity. A certain rustic belonging to the village, going to see his friend, who resided in the neighboring hamlet, was returning, a little intoxicated, late at night; when, behold, he heard, as it were, the voice of singing and reveling on an adjacent hillock, which I have often seen, and which is distant from the village only a few furlongs. Wondering who could be thus disturbing the silence of midnight with noisy mirth, he was anxious to investigate the matter more closely; and perceiving in the side of the hill an open door, he approached, and, looking in, he beheld a house, spacious and lighted up, filled with men and women, who were seated, as it were, at a solemn banquet. One of the attendants,

perceiving him standing at the door, offered him a cup: accepting it, he wisely forbore to drink; but, pouring out the contents, and retaining the vessel, he quickly departed. A tumult arose among the company, on account of the stolen cup, and the guests pursued him; but he escaped by the fleetness of his steed, and reached the village with his extraordinary prize. It was a vessel of an unknown material, unusual color, and strange form: it was offered as a great present to Henry the elder, king of England and then handed over to the queen's brother, David, king of Scotland, and deposited for many years among the treasures of his kingdom; and, a few years since, as we have learnt from authentic relation, it was given up by William, king of the Scots, to Henry II, on his desiring to see it.

The province of the Deiri is the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Deira, which included East Yorkshire; William was born at Bridlington, not far from Willy Howe; the Gipse is the stream now known as the Gypsy Race, which flows through Wold Newton and Burton Fleming; Henry the elder is Henry I of England (1100-1135).

### *Shape-Shifting Ghosts in North Yorkshire*

In around 1400 a monk from Byland Abbey on the North York Moors wrote down a series of ghost stories in Latin, which were discovered in the early 20th century by the Cambridge don and writer of ghost stories, M.R. James, and were soon translated into English<sup>41</sup>. Here is the first story:

Concerning the ghost of a certain labourer at Rievaulx who helped a man to carry beans.

A certain man was riding on his horse carrying on its back a peck of beans. The horse stumbled on the road and broke its shin bone; which when the man saw he took the beans on his own back. And while he was walking on the road he saw as it were a horse standing on its hind feet and holding up its fore feet. In alarm he forbade the horse in the name of Jesus Christ to do him any harm. Upon this it went with him in

the shape of a horse, and in a little while appeared to him in the likeness of a revolving haycock with a light in the middle; to which the man said, “ God forbid that you bring evil upon me.” At these words it appeared in the shape of a man and the traveller conjured him. Then the spirit told him his name and the reason (of his walking) and the remedy, and he added, “ Permit me to carry your beans and to help you.” And thus he did as far as the beck but he was not willing to pass over it ; and the living man knew not how the bag of beans was placed again on his own back. And afterwards he caused the ghost to be absolved and masses to be sung for him and he was eased.

Rievaulx is on the North York Moors not far from Byland,; like a number of the Byland ghosts this ghost is a shape-shifter, but bizarrely is able to carry the laborer’s beans. We can link this story to the shortest one in the collection, in which a woman carries a ghost:

What I write is a great marvel. It is said that a certain woman laid hold of a ghost and carried him on her back into a certain house in presence of some men, one of whom reported that he saw the hands of the woman sink deeply into the flesh of the ghost as though the flesh were rotten and not solid but phantom flesh.

This next ghost is also a shape-shifter, but much more terrifying

Concerning a wonderful encounter between a ghost and a living man in the time of King Richard II.

It is said that a certain tailor of the name of Snowball was returning on horseback one night from Gilling to his home in Ampleforth, and on the way he heard as it were the sound of ducks washing themselves in the beck, and soon after he saw as it were a raven that flew round his face and came down to the earth and struck the ground with its wings as though it were on the point of death. And the tailor got off his horse to take the raven, and as he did so he saw sparks of fire shooting from the sides of the raven. Whereupon he crossed himself and forbade him in

the name of God to bring at that time any harm upon him. Then it flew off with a great screaming for about the space of a stone's throw. Then again he mounted his horse and very soon the same raven met him as it flew, and struck him on the side and threw the tailor to the ground from the horse upon which he was riding ; and he lay stretched upon the ground as it were in a swoon and lifeless, and he was very frightened. Then, rising and strong in the faith, he fought with him with his sword until he was weary; and it seemed to him that he was striking a peat-stack; and he forbade him and conjured him in the name of God, saying, " God forbid that you have power to hurt me on this occasion, but begone." And again it flew off with a horrible screaming as it were the space of the flight of an arrow. And the third time it appeared to the tailor as he was carrying the cross of his sword upon his breast for fear, and it met him in the likeness of a dog with a chain on its neck. And when he saw it the tailor, strong in the faith, thought within himself, what will become of me ? I will adjure him in the name of the Trinity and by the virtue of the blood of Christ from His five wounds that he speak with me, and do me no wrong, but stand fast and answer my questions and tell me his name and the cause of his punishment and the remedy that belongs to it." And he did so And the spirit, panting terribly and groaning, said, " Thus and thus did I, and for thus doing I have been excommunicated . Go therefore to a certain priest and ask him to absolve me. And it behoves me to have the full number of nine times twenty masses celebrated for me. And now of two things you must choose one. Hither you shall come back to me on a certain night alone bringing to me the answer of those whose names I have given you; and I will tell you how you may be made whole, and in the mean time you need not fear the sight of a wood fire . Or otherwise your flesh shall rot and your skin shall dry up and shall fall off from you utterly in a short time. Know moreover that I have met you now because to-day you have not heard mass nor the gospel of John, and have not seen the

consecration of our Lord's body and blood, for otherwise I should not have had full power of appearing to you ." And as he spoke with the tailor he was as it were on fire and his inner parts could be seen through his mouth and he formed his words in his entrails and did not speak with his tongue.

The tailor did as the ghost requested and returned to confront the specter:

he came to the appointed place and made a great circle with a cross and he had upon him the four gospels and other holy words and he stood in the middle of the circle and he placed four reliquaries in the form of a cross on the edge of the circle; and on the reliquaries were written words of salvation, namely Jesus of Nazareth, etc., and he waited for the coming of the ghost. He came at length in the form of a she-goat and went thrice round the circle saying, " Ah ! ah ! ah ! " And when he conjured the she-goat she fell prone upon the ground, and rose up again in the likeness of a man of great stature, horrible and thin, and like one of the dead kings in pictures. And when he was asked whether the tailor's labour had been of service to him, he answered, " Yes, praised be God. And I stood at your back when you buried my absolution in my grave at the ninth hour and were afraid. No wonder you were afraid, for three devils were present there who have tormented me in every way from the time when you first conjured me to the time of my absolution, suspecting that they would have me but very little time in their custody to torment me. Know therefore that on Monday next I shall pass into everlasting joy with thirty other spirits.

Ampleforth is on the edge of the North York Moors; like all the Byland ghosts he is eventually given peace by the rituals and ceremonies of the Catholic Church (unsurprisingly, given that the writer was a monk).

## LATER TALES OF FAIRIES

### *Lake Windermere (Cumbria)*

Ambleside is at the head of Lake Windermere in Cumbria, and Henry Cowper, writing in 1899, said that fairies were extinct there. However<sup>42</sup>:

One old fellow told the writer indeed that in his young days strange were the reputed doings of the little folk in Ambleside fair and market. Dressed as common folk, they would mingle with the marketing folk, and then by blowing at the women at the market stalls they became invisible, and were enabled to steal things from the stalls.

Little Langdale is near Ambleside, and also had its fairies<sup>43</sup>:

In Little Langdale the Busk and the Forge, the latter place only separated from our parish by the Brathay, were regularly visited by fairies harmless little beings it would seem, of the house-goblin class, for their principal occupation seems to have been churning butter after the family had retired for the night. They were, however, rather thriftless little folk, for near the Forge it was common to find bits of butter scattered in the woods, dropped, it would seem, by the uncanny churners in their morning flight.

Ambleside and Little Langdale are close to Great Langdale, a remote valley in the Lake District, to the west of Grasmere. which was a centre of stone axe production during the Neolithic. The axes from Great Langdale were made from polished greenstone, and have been found in places as far apart as Northern Ireland and Peterborough, with a concentration in Lincolnshire and the East Midlands. The greenstone comes from the intrusion of a narrow vein of tuff in the volcanic rocks of Great Langdale. Debris and hundreds of “reject” axes have been found on the scree slopes of Pike of Stickle<sup>44</sup>. The Pike of Stickle is a fell (hill) 2,326 feet high, and the axe factory is on the steep southern face of the fell.

### *Hobs and Hobthrushes in North Yorkshire*

Fairies were not the only diminutive spirits in the north of England – there

were also hobs and hobthrushes. Hobs (the name is thought to be a diminutive form of Robert) were spirits found mostly in the North and North Midlands. Atkinson, writing in 1868, says of them<sup>45</sup>

Hob. The appellation of a spirit, or being of elf-nature, who must once have occupied a prominent place in the belief or popular faith of the people of the district.

To which he adds that “there were many Hobs, each with a ‘local habitation’ and a ‘local name’.”

Hob Hole is a large natural cavern on Runswick Bay near Whitby in North Yorkshire. According to Walker Ord this cave “is supposed to possess the power of curing the whooping-cough”<sup>46</sup>.

Related to the hob is the hobthrush, from hob plus Old English *thyrs* “giant”<sup>47</sup>. According to Atkinson, hobthrush is a word occurring in the designations Hobtrush or Obtrush Rook (a Bronze Age round cairn in Farndale on the North York Moors, some 11 miles north of Kirkbymoorside), and Hobtrush Hob, a being once held to frequent a certain cave in the Mulgrave Woods near Whitby, and “wont to be addressed, and to reply, as follows”<sup>48</sup>:

“Hob-trush Hob ! Where is thou ?”

“Ah ‘s tying on mah left-fuit shoe;

An’ Ah ‘ll be wiv thee Noo !”

Hobthrush, says Atkinson, is a “local spirit, famous for whimsical pranks.” But this was not the only spirit in Mulgrave. Mackenzie Walcott<sup>49</sup> said that Jeanie, a bogle or fairy, lived in Mulgrave Woods. A farmer anxious to see her, called her by name: “Enraged at the insult, the nimble spirit pursued the man, and as he leaped his horse across a running brook, cut his horse in two with a blow of a rush.” Mulgrave Woods is part of the estate of Mulgrave Castle in Lythe, in an area with a number of Bronze Age barrows, including a round barrow on Whinney Hill. The barrow has an earth and stone mound

which has been spread by ploughing. It is up to 22m in diameter and stands up to 1m high. Part excavation in 1890 by Canon W Greenwell uncovered two cists consisting of stone slabs set vertically into the ground and these would have contained burials. He also found pottery, two jet ornaments and a cup marked stone within the matrix of the mound. The mound contained flint implements including two scrapers and a jet bead<sup>50</sup>.

## BOGLES, BARGUESTS AND BOGGARTS

### *The Hedley Kow (Northumberland)*

Some bogles were similar to hobs, but other bogles, like barguests and boggarts, were much more sinister. There was a mischievous bogle at Hedley on the Hill in Northumberland, between Hexham and Newcastle upon Tyne, that was known as the Hedley Kow. It used to play tricks on people, as in this example<sup>51</sup>:

Two young men belonging to Newlands, near Ebchester, went out one night to meet their sweet-hearts; and, on arriving at the appointed place, they saw, as they supposed, the two girls walking at a short distance before them. The girls continued to walk onward for two or three miles, and the young men to follow, without being able to overtake them. They quickened their pace, but, still the girls kept before them ; and, at length, when the lovers found themselves up to the knees in a mire, the girls suddenly disappeared with a most unfeminine Ha! Ha! The young men now perceived that they had been beguiled by the Hedley Kow; and, after getting clear of the mire, ran homeward as fast as their legs could carry them, the bogle following, hooting and laughing, close at their heels.

Ebchester was the site of Vindomara Roman fort. which was still clearly visible in the early 18th century. Historians of the time tell of hewn stone walls with a vast Roman suburb (town) to the east, south and west<sup>52</sup>.



### *The Barguest of Glassenikes (Darlington)*

In Northumberland, Durham and Yorkshire there is a shapeshifting demon called the barguest (the second element is related to English ghost)<sup>53</sup>:

The proverbial expression, “To roar like a Barguest,” attests to the hold he has had on the popular mind. His vocation appears to have been that of a presage of death; and, bearing this in mind, Sir Walter Scott’s derivation of his name from the German “ bahrgeist,” spirit of the bier, seems the most probable among the many suggested. A friend informs me that Glassensikes, near Darlington, is haunted by a Barguest, which assumes at will the form of a headless man (who disappears in flame), a headless lady, a white cat, rabbit, or dog, or a black dog. There is a Barguest, too, in a most uncanny-looking glen, between Darlington and Houghton, near Throstlenest, and a circumstantial account has been supplied to me of one which haunts or haunted a piece of waste land above a spring called the Oxwells, between Wreghorn and Headingley Hill near Leeds. On the death of any person of local importance in the neighbourhood, the creature would come forth, a large black dog with flaming eyes as big as saucers, followed by all the dogs of the place howling and barking. If any one came in its way the Barguest would strike out with its paw and inflict on man or beast a wound which would never heal. My informant, a Yorkshire gentleman, lately deceased, said he perfectly remembered the terror he experienced when a child at beholding this procession before the death of a certain Squire Wade, of New Grange.

Barguests, it seems, were often associated with water – no surprise given the Romano-British water goddesses at Carrawburgh Roman fort, and the St. Helen’s wells in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire.

### *The Bogles of Melsonby (North Yorkshire)*

Presumably related to these were the bogles to be found at Melsonby near Richmond in North Yorkshire, who are also linked to water<sup>54</sup>:

there were plenty of ghosts or bogles about the village of Melsonby A well there, called the Lady Well, was haunted by a lady without a head, and Berry Well by a bogle in the form of a white goose. Not far off was a conical hill, called Diddersley Hill, on Gatherley Moor, where an old farmer declares the fairies used to dance in his young days. And near this hill an arch spanned the road, not of any great antiquity, certainly; still a mounted horseman was to be seen upon it in the early morning light, to the great terror of the farmers' lads who had to pass beneath, starting before dawn with carts for coals into " Bishoprig," i. e. the county of Durham

The bogles of Melsonby were different from the bogle of Hedley on the Hill, who could also change shape, but only to play tricks on people. Close to Melsonby is Stanwick Camp, a Late Iron Age univallate hillfort with some 4 miles of ramparts enclosing an area of 310ha (766 acres)<sup>55</sup>.

### *The Bogle of Appleby (Cumbria)*

Appleby is on the River Eden in Cumbria, and it was troubled by a bogle, as reported in 1857 by Jeremiah Sullivan<sup>56</sup>:

About the latter end of the last century, a man well known in the neighbourhood of Appleby as Old Shepherd, whose life had not been spent in virtuous deeds, became so troublesome as a boggle, that he had to be forcibly expelled from the house, and laid. A Catholic priest was the exorcist, and the " material guarantee," under which he was laid, a large stone not far from the door. My informant, who lived in that part of the country about forty years ago, on the occasion of an election triumph, assisted at a bone-fire within a short distance of Old Shepherd's house. Whilst they were enjoying themselves round the fire, and " cracking" of Old Shepherd, lo ! the old fellow made his appearance from under the stone in the shape of a large white something; but he turned off sideways, and sailed down the " beck," in which they could hear him splashing like a horse. Encouraged by the

shyness of the boggle, they burned out their fire, and removed further down the “beck side,” where some wood was known to be lying. Here they made another fire, when Old Shepherd again hove in sight. The second time my informant did not see him, but some one gave the alarm, and all dispersed for the night.

Sullivan says of bogles<sup>57</sup>:

Animal shapes are amongst those most commonly assumed by boggles. Large dogs, white horses, unaccountable cats, and white rabbits, all add to the boggle family ; but are expected to appear where they have no business, to vanish through the dark side of stone walls, or to disappear down craggy, steep paths near which no well-meaning animals should be found. “ It is said that a farmer at Hackthorpe Hall was led to the discovery of hidden treasure by an apparition in the form of a calf. He had noticed that this spectre always vanished beneath or near to a large trough, which at that time stood in the farm-yard. He had the trough lifted on edge, and found beneath it a hoard of gold, with which he afterwards purchased two estates in Cumberland.

Hackthorpe Hall near Lowther lies to the south of Penrith in Cumbria.

### *The Barguest of Beetham (Cumbria)*

William Henderson, in a discussion of barguests, says that there was a similar ghost at Beetham in the far south of Cumbria<sup>58</sup>:

In the county of Westmoreland and some adjacent parts of Yorkshire there was formerly a belief in the existence of a similar being, called the Capelthwaite. He had the power of appearing in the form of any quadruped, but usually chose that of a large black dog. Fifty years ago there was, perhaps still is, in the parish of Beetham, near the town of Milnthorpe, a barn called Capelthwaite barn, as having been the residence of such a being. He was very well disposed towards the occupants of the barn, who suffered him to haunt it unmolested. For

them he performed various kind acts, especially helping them in driving home their sheep. On one occasion he is said, after a hard chase, to have driven a hare by mistake into the barn, observing, “ How quickly that sheep runs.” Towards all other persons he appears to have been very spiteful and mischievous, so much so that tradition tells of a Vicar of Beetham in former days going out in his ecclesiastical vestments and saying some prayers or forms of exorcism with intent to “ lay “ this troublesome sprite in the river Bela. Accordingly the Capelthwaite does not seem to have appeared in later times, except that a man of the neighbourhood who returned home late at night, tipsy, much bruised, and without coat or hat, persistently assured his wife that he had met the Capelthwaite, who threw him over a hedge and deprived him of those articles of dress.

### *The Boggart of Longridge (Cumbria)*

A variation on the bogle is the boggart, like this one from Longridge in the Ribble valley of Lancashire, not far from Ribchester Roman fort, reported by James Bowker in 1878. A man called Gabriel, after an evening spent in the White Bull at Longridge, set off around midnight for his home in Thornley. As he was walking along he saw the figure of a woman<sup>59</sup>:

he saw that the object wore a long light cloak and hood, and a large coal-scuttle bonnet ; and surprised to find that the sound of his footsteps did not cause her to turn to see who was following, he called out :

‘It’s a bonny neet [night], Missis; bud yo’re aat [out] rayther late, arn’t yo’?’

‘It is very fine,’ answered the woman, in a voice which Gabriel thought was the sweetest he had ever heard, but without turning towards him as she spoke.

He addressed the woman again, but she did not reply; so he rebuked her saying she must have left her tongue at home:

This taunt, however, like the direct query, failed to provoke an answer,

although the startled Gabriel could have sworn that a smothered laugh came from beneath the white cloth which covered the contents of the basket. ‘Let me carry yer basket,’ said he ; ‘it’s heavy for yo’.’

Without a word, the woman held it out to him; but, as Gabriel grasped the handle, a voice, which sounded as though the mouth of the speaker were close to his hand, slowly said : ‘You’re very kind, I’m sure ;’ and then there came from the same quarter a silvery peal of laughter.

“What i’ th’ warld can it be?” said Gabriel, as without more ado he let the basket fall to the ground. He did not remain in ignorance very long, however, for, as the white cloth slipped off, a human head, with fixed eyes, rolled out. ‘Th’ yedless boggart!’ cried he, as the figure turned to pick up the head, and revealed to him an empty bonnet, and away he fled down the hill, fear lending him speed.

The boggart pursued him and threw her head after him – as he came near the head “it snapped at his feet, the teeth striking together with a dreadfully suggestive clash.”

## KING ARTHUR

### *Sewingshields Castle (Northumberland)*

Medieval or Early Modern writers may have claimed that King Arthur was buried in Glastonbury, or sleeping either in Cadbury Castle (Somerset), or in Sleeper’s Hill near Winchester, but he was also well known in the north of England – which is to be expected, since the legend of Arthur may well have originated in what the Welsh called the “Old North.” Arthur is associated with Sewingshields castle, a 15th century fortified tower house at Simonburn in Northumberland, close to Hadrian’s Wall and Carrawburgh Roman fort, in a tale recorded in 1846<sup>60</sup>:

Immemorial tradition has asserted that King Arthur, his queen Guenever, court of lords and ladies, and his hounds, were enchanted in

some cave of the crags, or in a hall below the castle of Sewingshields, and would continue entranced there till some one should first blow a bugle horn that laid on a table near the entrance into the hall, and then, with “the sword of stone,” cut a garter also placed there beside it. But none had ever heard where the entrance to this enchanted hall was, till the farmer at Sewingshields, about 50 years since, was sitting knitting on the ruins of the castle, and his clew fell, and ran downwards through a rush of briars and nettles, as he supposed, into a deep subterranean passage. Full in the faith, that the entrance into king Arthur’s hall was now discovered, he cleared the briary portal of its weeds and rubbish, and entering a vaulted passage, followed in his darkling way the thread of his clew. The floor was infested with toads and lizards: and the dark wings of bats, disturbed by his unhallowed intrusion, flitted fearfully around him. At length his sinking faith was strengthened by a dim, distant light, which, as he advanced, grew gradually brighter, till all at once, he entered a vast and vaulted hall, in the centre of which a fire without fuel, from a broad crevice in the floor, blazed with a high and lambent flame, that showed all the carved walls, and fretted roof, and the monarch, and his queen and court, reposing around in a theatre of thrones and costly couches. On the floor, beyond the fire, lay the faithful and deep-toned pack of thirty couple of hounds; and on a table before it, the spell-dissolving horn, sword, and garter. The shepherd reverently, but firmly, grasped the sword, and as he drew it leisurely from its rusty scabbard, the eyes of the monarch and his courtiers began to open, and they rose till they sat upright. He cut the garter; and, as the sword was being slowly sheathed, the spell assumed its antient power, and they all gradually sunk to rest; but not before the monarch lifted up his eyes and hands, and exclaimed,

“O woe betide that evil day,  
On which this witless wight was born,  
Who drew the sword—the garter cut,

But never blew the bugle horn!”

*Richmond Castle (North Yorkshire)*

Arthur is also associated with Richmond Castle in North Yorkshire, in a later tale, recorded in 1892 which is similar to the tale from Sewingshields. At Richmond Castle, Arthur and his knights are said to lie under the roots of the great tower, spellbound. A certain Potter Thompson was once led into the vault, where he saw the king and his knights ; and, on a great table, a horn and sword. He began to draw the sword, but, as the sleepers stirred, he was frightened and dropped it. A voice exclaimed<sup>61</sup> :

Potter, Potter Thompson,  
If thou hadst either drawn  
The sword, or blown the horn,  
Thou’dst been the luckiest man that ever yet was born.

*Ravenglass (Cumbria)*

Ravenglass on the coast of Cumbria, not far from the Lake District, was the site of a Roman fort and settlement in use until the late 4th century. Camden, writing in 1599, says of the Roman fort: “They talke much of King Eveling that heere had his court and roiall palace.” In 1924 W.G. Collingwood proposed an identification of Eveling with Avallach, in early Welsh literature the father of Modron, who carried the wounded Arthur to Avalon after the Battle of Camlann<sup>62</sup>. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, Camlann was in Cornwall, but is can be equally linked to Camboglanna (Castlesteads Roman fort on Hadrian’s Wall in Cumbria)<sup>63</sup>.

## THE DEVIL AND DEMONS

*Darlington (County Durham)*

Hell Kettles (or Devil’s Kettles) are two pools on the floodplain of the River Tees to the south of Darlington in County Durham. They are mentioned in Hollinshed’s *Chronicles* (1587): “There are certain pits, or rather three little

pools, a mile from Darlington, and a quarter of a mile distant from the Tees banks which the people call the Kettles of hell, or the devils Kettles.”<sup>64</sup>. Longstaffe, writing in 1854, quotes Brompton’s Chronicle for the year 1179<sup>65</sup>:

About Christmas, a wonderful and unheard of event fell out at Oxenhale, viz., that in the very domain of Lord Hugh, Bishop of Durham, the ground rose up on high with such vehemence, that it was equal to the highest tops of the mountains, and towered above the lofty pinnacles of the churches; and at that height remained from the ninth hour of the day even to sunset. But at sunset it fell with so horrible a crash, that it terrified all who saw that heap, and heard the noise of its fall, whence many died from that fear; for the earth swallowed it up, and caused in the same place a very deep pit.

According to the *Denham Tracts*, published in 1892, many fabulous traditional stories are told of them<sup>66</sup>:

It is said that they are bottomless ; that the water is hot in consequence of reverberation ; that geese and ducks thrown therein have dived through subterranean passages to the River Tees. Harrison (1577) calls them “three little poles, which the people call the Kettles of Hell, or the Devil’s Kettles, as if he should see the souls of sinfull men and women in them ; they adde also that the spirits oft beene heard to cry and yell about them.”

Barnaby yea ! Barnaby nay !

A cart-load of hay, whether God will or nay

Many centuries ago the owner, or occupier, of the field where the Hell Kettles are situate was going to lead his hay on the feast-day of St. Barnabas (11th June) ; and, on being remonstrated with on the impiety of the act by some more pious neighbour, he used the above rhymes, when instantly he, his carts and horses, were all swallowed up in the pools; where they may still be seen, on a fine day and clear water, many



fathoms deep!

*Piercebridge (County Durham)*

The River Tees itself was also a dangerous place, particularly at Piercebridge, not far from Darlington and Hell Kettles<sup>67</sup>:

The belief of our credulous ancestry in a female river demon is still early implanted in the mind of childhood on the banks of the Tees. Peg-Powler is the evil goddess of the Tees ; and many are the tales still told at Piercebridge, of her dragging naughty children into its deep waters when playing, despite the orders and threats of their parents, on its banks — especially on the Sabbath-day. And the writer still perfectly recollects being dreadfully alarmed in the days of his childhood lest, more particularly when he chanced to be alone on the margin of those waters, she should issue from the stream and snatch him into her watery chambers.

As I said earlier, during the Roman period coins and brooches were deposited in the River Tees at Piercebridge, presumably as offerings to the god or goddess of the river.

## HELL HOUNDS

*The Gabriel Hounds of The Lower Calder Valley*

Gabriel Hounds, or Ratchets, have been known since the 17th century<sup>68</sup>. In his Memoranda for 2nd March 1664, while living at Coley Hall, Brighouse, on the River Calder in West Yorkshire, Reverend Oliver Heywood wrote: “There is also a strange noise in the air heard of many in these parts this winter, called Gabriel-Ratches (sic) by this country-people, the noise is as if a great number of whelps were barking and howling, and ‘tis observed that if any see them the persons that see them die shortly after, they are never heard but before a great death or dearth.” The tradition was still familiar to the Cumbrian poet William Wordsworth in 1807. One of his sonnets from

that year contains the lines “For overhead are sweeping the Gabriel Hounds / Doomed with the imperious lord, the flying hart / To chase forever on aerial grounds” In his *Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties of England* of 1879, folklorist William Henderson described them as “monstrous human-headed dogs, who traverse the air, and are often heard although seldom seen.” However, Henderson goes on to add “In the neighbourhood of Leeds the phenomenon is... held to be the souls of unbaptised children doomed to flit restlessly around their parents home”. The word ratchet is from Old English *ræcc*, a dog that hunts by scent<sup>69</sup>; the 15th century *Promptorium Parvulorum*, a Latin-English vocabulary, gives “Gabriel” as a variant of medieval Latin *gabares* “corpse”, a word apparently borrowed from Arabic, perhaps at the time of the Crusades and the crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem (1099-1291)<sup>70</sup>. The Gabriel Ratchets resemble the Cwn Annwn of Wales, and both Brighouse and Leeds are not far from the British kingdom of Elmet, which probably survived into the 6th century.

### *The Hell-Hound Skriker of Chipping (Lancashire)*

Chipping is in the Ribble Valley of Lancashire, not far from Sawley Abbey, and had a hell-hound called Skriker (Shrieker), who was also a portent of death<sup>71</sup>. One night a certain Adam aet out from the Patten Arms in Chipping to walk to his home some 3 or 4 miles away. He was about to cross the bridge over the brook at Thornley when he heard the noise of passing feet in the crunching snow, and became conscious of the presence of a ghastly thing he was unable to see.

Suddenly a sepulchral howl brought him to a stop, and, with his heart throbbing loudly enough to be heard, he stood gazing fixedly into the darkness. There was nothing to be perceived, however, save the copings of the bridge, with their coverings of rime ; and he might have stood there until daylight had not another cry, louder and even more unearthly and horrible than the preceding one, called him from his trance. No

sooner had this second scream died away than, impelled by an irresistible impulse, he stepped forward in the direction whence the noise had come. At this moment the moon burst forth from behind the clouds which had for some time obscured her light, and her rays fell upon the road, with its half-hidden cart-tracks winding away into the dim distance ; and in the very centre of the bridge he beheld a hideous figure with black shaggy hide, and huge eyes closely resembling orbs of fire. Adam at once knew from the likeness the dread object bore to the figure he had heard described by those who had seen the Skriker [Shrieker], that the terrible thing before him was an Ambassador of Death.

The black dog followed Adam home, but that was not the end of the story: 3 days later his eldest son was drowned, and a few weeks later his wife died. Unsurprisingly, Chipping is not far from Fairy Holes, a cave located near the top of a steep wooded bluff formed in the limestone cliff overlooking the River Hodder. Excavation in 1946 by RS Musson recovered some sherds of Bronze Age pottery, animal bones, a pebble pounder, a flint flake and a core. Also present were 3 unidentifiable pieces of iron and a possible hearth<sup>72</sup>.

### *The Shape-Shifters of Northern England*

The fairies of northern England are a fairly harmless lot, and the most sinister spirits are the various shape-shifters like bogles and boggarts. The origin of these shape-shifters is unclear, but a Norse origin is most likely. In Norse mythology the trickster god Loki is a shape-shifter and seems to have been known in England. The 10th century Gosforth Cross from Gosforth in the Lake District of Cumbria is thought to show Loki bound up after he killed the god Baldr, with his wife Sigyn alongside him<sup>73</sup>.

According to Emma Groeneveld<sup>74</sup>, shape-shifting is “one of the recurring motifs in tales about Loki, being recorded by various sources as changing into a hawk; a fly and a flea; as well as water-based creatures like a salmon

and a seal; and even switching gender to become a young maiden, an old hag.” In fact, says Groeneveld, there is even “a strange tale in which Loki shape-shifts into a mare and gives birth to the eight-legged horse Sleipnir fathered by the giant stallion Svaðilfari.” The shape-shifters of northern England are tricksters, can assume human or animal form, and can switch back and forth from male to female, all of which suggests a strong link to the Norse god Loki.

## CHAPTER 12

### *The Folklore of Anglo-Saxon and Viking England from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century (2) The Folklore of East Anglia: Fairies, Mermaids, and Will-O'-The-Wisps*

#### THE ANGLO-SAXON KINGDOM OF EAST ANGLIA

##### *Pagan East Anglia*

After the Romans departed, Anglo-Saxons settled in southeast Suffolk and established the kingdom of East Anglia. The first king of East Anglia of whom anything is known is Rædwald, who ruled from 599 to 624. He converted to Christianity around 605, but his Christianity was obviously lukewarm, for as Bede says<sup>1</sup>, "in the same temple he had an altar to sacrifice to Christ, and another small one to offer victims to devils". Bede also says<sup>2</sup> that Rædwald was the fourth king that "had the sovereignty of all the southern provinces that are divided from the Northern by the river Humber".

Rædwald may have been the high-status individual buried at Sutton Hoo, near Woodbridge in Suffolk, in the famous ship-burial. In 1939 Mrs Edith Pretty, a landowner at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, asked archaeologist Basil Brown to investigate the largest of many Anglo-Saxon burial mounds on her property. Inside, he made one of the most spectacular archaeological discoveries of all time. "Beneath the mound was the imprint of a 27-metre-long ship. At its centre was a ruined burial chamber packed with treasures: Byzantine silverware, sumptuous gold jewellery, a lavish feasting set, and most famously, an ornate iron helmet." Tiny fragments showed that rich textiles once adorned the walls and floor, along with piles of clothes ranging

from fine linen overshirts to shaggy woollen cloaks and caps trimmed with fur<sup>3</sup>.

This was not the only elite burial at Sutton Hoo. Mound 17 at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk contained a young warrior and a horse, and was excavated by Martin Carver's team in 1991. The excavation revealed two grave pits under the mound, one containing a young man and the other containing a horse. "The young man was aged about twenty-five, and had been buried in a rectangular wooden coffin fitted with iron clamps. At his side there was a long sword with a horn pommel, together with an iron knife in a leather sheath. The buckle of his sword-belt was made of bronze inlaid with garnets. A small cloth-lined leather purse or pouch had been placed by his shoulder, containing seven rough-cut garnets, a single garnet in the shape of a bird's beak, and a fragment of red and blue glass."<sup>4</sup>

There was an early Anglo-Saxon cemetery at RAF Lakenheath near Mildenhall. The cemetery included two early Anglo-Saxon horse and warrior burials, one uncovered in 1997 and one in 1999: the 1997 example included a gilded ceremonial bridle. Both of these burials were covered by a barrow and defined by a ditch, and are dated to the 6th century. The horse and warrior burial of 1999 was described in that year: "The warrior himself was interred with a full set of weapons including sword, shield and spear ... The burial provides further evidence of the early Anglian tradition of animal sacrifice at the grave of a dead warrior chieftain. The famous early 7th century cemetery at Sutton Hoo, on the Suffolk coast, included one warrior burial immediately adjacent to a separate grave containing a slaughtered horse"<sup>5</sup>.

### *Early Christianity in East Anglia*

Bede says<sup>6</sup> that Swithhelm, king of Essex, was baptized at the East Anglian royal estate of Rendlesham near Woodbridge in Suffolk, and the site of this royal estate has recently been located. "Archaeological evaluation was undertaken on the Naunton Hall Estate close to the River Deben in Rendlesham to test the character and degree of preservation of the subsoil

archaeology in two fields that had previously been subject to intensive metal-detecting and geophysical survey. These surveys indicated extensive and high status Anglo-Saxon activity which can be related to the reference in Bede to a 'vicus regius' at Rendlesham in the 7th century and represent a residence of those buried at Sutton Hoo about 3.5 miles to the south-west"<sup>7</sup>.

Christianity did not become established in East Anglia until the reign of Sigeberht, who came to the throne around 630 and ruled for about ten years. Bede calls Sigeberht<sup>8</sup> "a good and religious man" who had been baptized in France after being exiled by Rædwald. Sigeberht established East Anglia's first bishopric at Dommoc<sup>9</sup>, probably Dunwich on the east Suffolk coast, with Felix of Burgundy as the first bishop. During the 630s, Sigeberht also established a royal palace, the cathedral church of St Felix, and the earliest documented English school. A school at Dunwich was last mentioned between 1076-1083 when it was granted to Eye Priory in Suffolk. The church was overwhelmed by the sea in 1330, and no trace of the palace, church or school remains<sup>10</sup>. While Sigeberht was king, says Bede<sup>11</sup>, the Irish priest Fursey established a monastery at Cnobheresburg, possibly the Roman fort of Burgh Castle near Great Yarmouth in Norfolk.

In the 7th century the bishopric moved to North Elmham in Norfolk. A complex Anglo-Saxon village settlement "was excavated in 1967-70 by P. Wade-Martins who identified 5 occupational periods. The excavation revealed 32 timber buildings ranging in date from about the 7th or 8th century to the late 11th or early 12th centuries. The buildings ranged from large halls to smaller houses and outbuildings." In Period I (650-850), there were numerous ditches, and two buildings. "This early site plan exhibits a remarkably symmetrical arrangement and an overall control suggestive of a cathedral community living here in the pre-Danish period. The earliest dateable building is from the eighth or early ninth century. In the early 10th century a group of large halls were built round a courtyard indicating a Bishop's Palace. There is no certain documentation for a Bishop here until Athulf in about 950 AD"<sup>12</sup>.

*St. Etheldreda of Ely (Cambridgeshire)*

Æthelthryth (also known as Etheldreda or Audrey) was the daughter of King Anna of East Anglia. She married the Northumbrian king Ecgfrith in 660 but, according to Bede, remained a virgin throughout her marriage. Eventually she entered the monastery of St Abbs Head near Coldingham in the Scottish Borders, but after a year she was made abbess of the monastery at Ely in Cambridgeshire, which lay on an island surrounded by fenland. Sixteen years after her death, says Bede<sup>13</sup>, her sister and successor Abbess Seaxburh

thought fit to take up her bones, and, putting them into a new coffin, to translate them into the church. Accordingly she ordered some of the brothers to provide a stone to make a coffin of; they accordingly went on board ship, because the country of Ely is on every side encompassed with the sea or marshes, and has no large stones, and came to a small abandoned city, not far from thence, which, in the language of the English, is called Grantchester [= Cambridge], and presently, near the city walls, they found a white marble coffin, most beautifully wrought, and neatly covered with a lid of the same sort of stone. Concluding therefore that God had prospered their journey, they returned thanks to Him, and carried it to the monastery.

The body of the holy virgin and spouse of Christ, when her grave was opened, being brought into sight, was found as free from corruption as if she had died and been buried on that very day; as the aforesaid Bishop Wilfrid, and many others that know it, can testify.

Miracles occurred at the tomb of the saint: “It happened also that by the touch of that linen, devils were expelled from bodies possessed, and other distempers were sometimes cured; and the coffin she was first buried in is reported to have cured some of distempers in the eyes, who, praying with their heads touching that coffin, presently were delivered from the pain or dimness in their eyes.”



## THE VIKING INVASION AND THE END OF THE ANGLO-SAXON KINGDOM

### *The Viking Invasion*

In 865, according to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, “a great [heathen] raiding-army came to the land of the English and took winter-quarters in East Anglia”. The Great Heathen Army crossed into Northumbria and in 866 captured York. In the following year the Danes went into Mercia and fixed their winter headquarters at Nottingham. The Mercian king Burgred appealed to Æthelred of Wessex for help, and the two besieged Nottingham, and made peace with the Danes. In 870 the Danes conquered the kingdom of East Anglia and destroyed the monastery of Medhamstede (Peterborough). According to the Chronicle<sup>14</sup>, “King Edmund fought against them, and the Danish took the victory, and killed the king and conquered all the land.”

### *St. Edmund of Bury St Edmunds (Suffolk)*

In around 986 the monks of Ramsey Abbey in Cambridgeshire commissioned Abbo of Fleury, from Fleury Abbey on the River Loire near Orléans, to write a Life of St. Edmund. According to Abbo, one of Edmund’s killers was Hinguar (possible Ivar the Boneless). The Danish leader captured Edmund at a place called Hæglesdun, had him tied to a tree, scourged, shot at with arrows, and finally beheaded. To prevent a decent burial, the Danes threw the head into a thicket in Hæglesdun wood. As Edmund’s followers went seeking, calling out “Where are you, friend?” the head answered, “Here, here, here,” until at last they found it, clasped between a wolf’s paws, protected from other animals and uneaten. The people then took the head back to their village and fitted the head back on the body – the two miraculously reunited. The villagers buried the perfect uncorrupt body, which began to work miracles, and built a simple church over it. Later the body was taken to Beodricsworth, now Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk. Abbo says the body was perfect but had, as a sign of martyrdom,

a thin red line like a thread of silk around its neck<sup>15</sup>.

### *The Danish Occupation*

The Danes occupied East Anglia for around forty years, and during this time some settlements flourished. Before 878 there was only one urban centre in East Anglia (Ipswich), but by the early years of the 10th century Norwich and Thetford in Norfolk had become urbanised. Viking raiders set up their winter quarters in Thetford in 869. "It is not known exactly when Danish Vikings actually settled in Thetford but it is likely to have been in the late 880s. The town developed rapidly in the 10th century on both banks of the River Little Ouse to become a major Anglo-Scandinavian settlement."<sup>16</sup>.

Viking settlement in Norwich concentrated on a D-shaped area traversed by modern Magdalen Street and enclosed by an earth rampart. "Here are names such as Colegate, Fishergate, Gildengate (now Calvert Street) Snaygate (now St Georges Street) and Finkelgate (possibly Cuddlegate, an early lovers lane). Gata is old Norse for street. Churches such as St Olave in King Street and Clement (Colegate) were named after Scandinavian saints. The economy prospered from the late ninth century. Norwich soon eclipsed Thetford, previously the dominant Norfolk town."<sup>17</sup>.

## EAST ANGLIA FROM THE NORMAN CONQUEST TO THE REFORMATION

### *St. Edmund of Bury St Edmunds*

In 1020 King Canute replaced the community of secular priests at Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk with 20 Benedictine monks which was increased by a further sixty by William the Conqueror, who also increased the monastery's privileges. In 1095 St Edmund's remains were re-interred, this time in a stone church which replaced an earlier, timber church. The first half of the 12th century saw the construction of the cloister, chapter house, refectory, dormitory, infirmary, and, walls to the forecourt. In around 1150 fire caused

damage to all of these except the cloister, and they were subsequently rebuilt. In the second half of the 12th century the church continued to be extended and the abbot's and guest houses were rebuilt<sup>18</sup>.

Writing in the 12th century, John of Worcester tells this story of St. Edmund and Swein Forkbeard, king of Denmark and briefly king of England until his death in 1014 at Gainsborough in Lincolnshire<sup>19</sup>:

After many cruel atrocities, which he perpetrated both in England and in other lands, the tyrant Swein filled up the measure of his damnation by daring to demand enormous tribute from the town where the incorrupt body of the precious martyr Edmund lay, a thing no one had dared to do before... He very frequently threatened that if it were not speedily paid he would destroy utterly the martyr's church, and he would torture the clergy in various ways. In addition, he frequently disparaged the martyr himself in many ways – he dared to say that he had no sanctity – and, because there were no bounds to his malice, divine vengeance did not allow the blasphemer to live any longer.

At last, when the evening was approaching of the day on which, at the general assembly which he held at Gainsborough, he repeated the same threats, at a time when he was surrounded by Danish troops crowded together, he alone saw St Edmund, armed, coming towards him. When he had seen him, he was terrified and began to shout very noisily, saying “Help, fellow-warriors, help! St Edmund is coming to kill me!” And while he was saying this he was run through fiercely by the saint with a spear, and fell from the stallion on which he sat, and, tormented with great pain until twilight, he ended his life with a wretched death on 3 February.

Edmund was not forgotten after the dissolution of the monasteries. According to a tradition recorded in 1790, St. Edmund was killed at Hoxne in the northeast of Suffolk near the border with Norfolk<sup>20</sup>:

The tradition of the place asserts that King Edmund hid himself from

the Danes under a bridge over the Dove, now called “Gold Bridge;” and that a newly married couple, crossing the bridge by moonlight, saw the reflection of the King’s golden spurs in the water, and betrayed him. Accordingly St. Edmund pronounced a curse on every couple who should cross this bridge on their way to be married ; and until the bridge was rebuilt in the present century, a wide circuit was taken by bride and bridegroom in order to avoid it. (It is thought that the King’s bright armour is still to be seen on certain nights, glimmering through the water of the brook.)

### *The Shrine of Our Lady at Walsingham (Norfolk)*

There were many shrines to the Virgin Mary in medieval England, but the most famous was the shrine to Our Lady at Little Walsingham in the north of Norfolk. In a Book of Hours now in the University Library, Cambridge, a note claims that the original chapel at Walsingham was founded in 1061, and this is elaborated in a ballad published by Richard Pynson in or soon after 1496. But this very late evidence is contradicted by earlier and much more reliable material, which shows that the origins of the shrine belong to the early half of the 12th century. The cartulary of Walsingham Priory now in the British Museum furnishes a list of priors, giving both their names and the length of their periods of office which establishes that the priory at Walsingham began in or about 1153.

The shrine became prominent during the reign of Henry III, who visited Walsingham on eleven occasions between 1226 and 1272. Henry III’s son Edward I visited Walsingham on twelve occasions between 1277 and 1305. There were also eminent visitors from abroad including John, Duke of Brittany (1361) and Guy, Count of Pol (1363). In the 15th century Henry VI visited Walsingham at least three times. In 1487, according to the Italian historian Polydore Vergil, when Henry VII was faced with a rebellion, he “came to the place called Walsingham where he prayed devoutly before the image of the Blessed Virgin Mary ..., that he might be preserved from the wiles of his enemies.”<sup>21</sup>.

The shrine of Our Lady was destroyed at the time of the Reformation in the 1530s, and the statue of Our Lady was taken to London where it was burnt. The loss of the shrine was keenly felt, as we can see from this anonymous ballad, composed around 1600, which ends with these haunting lines<sup>22</sup>:

Weep, weep, O Walsingham,  
Whose days are nights,  
Blessings turned to blasphemies,  
Holy deeds to despites.  
Sin is where Our Lady sat,  
Heaven is turned to hell,  
Satan sits where Our Lord did sway—  
Walsingham, O farewell!

*The True Cross of Bromholm Priory (Norfolk)*

Bromholm Priory near Bacton on the north Norfolk coast, some 12 miles southeast of Cromer, was a Cluniac priory founded in 1113 by William de Glanville. What made this remote Norfolk priory celebrated throughout England, and through many parts of continental Christendom, for upwards of three centuries, was its possession of a famous cross made from fragments of the true cross. It was brought to England in 1223, and its story is told in some detail by Matthew Paris. An English priest who served in the emperor's chapel at Constantinople, having in his charge a cross made of the wood of our Saviour's cross, absconded on the emperor's death and brought it to England, and made it a condition of bestowing it on any monastery that he and his two sons should be admitted as monks. To this condition the sceptical monks of St. Albans and other great houses demurred, but at last the monastery of Bromholm believed the priest's story and agreed to his terms, and the cross was set up in their church. Its fame rapidly spread, and it soon became a place of pilgrimage. In the *Vision of Piers Plowman* (late 14th century) occur the lines: "And bidde the Roode of

Bromholm,/Bryng me out of dette.” In the *Reeve’s Tale* of Chaucer is the pious ejaculation: “Helpe, holy cross of Bromeholme.” The miracles associated with this pilgrimage were numerous. It is mentioned in the annals of Dunstable and Tewkesbury, and by other early chroniclers<sup>23</sup>.

### *St. Etheldreda of Ely*

The monastery at Ely in Cambridgeshire was refounded by Æthelwold, Bishop of Winchester, as a Benedictine abbey in 970, and dedicated to St Peter and the Blessed Virgin by Dunstan in 974. The building of the present church and monastic buildings was begun under Simeon, the first Norman abbot, in 1083, and was virtually completed in its present form by 1350 after which no further major building took place. The nave and transepts have exceptionally fine 12th century work, the chancel and west porch are 13th century, and the central crossing lantern and Lady Chapel are 14th century. The inner porch has some 15th century work<sup>24</sup>.

The cult of Etheldreda was promoted by the monks of Ely in the 12th century. In 1106 Etheldreda was translated to a new shrine and the bishop of Norwich preached “about the life and death and miracles of the blessed virgin and the marvellous incorruption of her holy body.” New miracles began to occur. A man called Wihtgar was cured of a crippling condition, and the news travelled far<sup>25</sup>:

Flocks of individuals were attracted, and marvels of healing were performed which for the most part, thanks to their number and the shortage or negligence of writers escape our memory, except for a few which we will truthfully recount.

### *St. Ivo of St Ives (Cambridgeshire)*

Ramsey in Cambridgeshire was an island in the Fens, known as Bodsey Island, and a monastery was founded there in 969 when the site was offered by Ailwine to St Oswald, Bishop of Worcester<sup>26</sup>. In about 1001 the monks of Ramsey discovered the relics of Ivo, supposedly a Persian bishop who lived and died as a hermit at Slepe, on the River Ouse near Huntingdon

(now called St Ives), with three of his companions, and translated them to Ramsey<sup>27</sup>.

To judge from the account written by Goscelin for the monks of Ramsey between 1087 and 1090, “it was an important part of the monks’ strategy to promote Ivo as a popular, wonder-working saint whose power was displayed not just at his new burial-place at Ramsey, but even more at the place of his life, death and discovery at Slepe, and especially at the spring which flowed there.” Abbot Ednoth built a church at Slepe which was so designed that half the spring was inside and half outside, “so that whether the door was open or locked, the boon of the water was available to visitors.”

Goscelin details a number of miracles attributed to Ivo. Abbot Ednoth (992-1008) was cured of gout, and Goscelin himself was cured of gout and toothache. A boy from Hampshire, congenitally weak in his hands and feet, was partially cured by St. Edward the Martyr at Shaftesbury before coming to Ramsey where he was completely cured and remained to “serve the saint.”<sup>28</sup> A monk in the entourage of an unnamed foreign abbot who paused to drink the water objected that

It did not become a prudent and religious man to lend himself to the folly and superstition of rustics; they are often known to frequent springs, being deceived by pagan error and, seduced by the illusory marvels of demons, to venerate the bones of all sorts of dead people, as if they were the relics of saints.

The foreign abbot had a point: the Cambridgeshire Fens played a significant role in pagan religion in the prehistoric and Roman period..

Having uttered this “ill-advised criticism the monk promptly fell ill.” To William of Malmesbury, writing in the 1120s, St. Ivo was the “most efficacious saint in all England” and the easiest to invoke.

The abbot and monks created a new town at Slepe, building a mile long road on a huge causeway across the floodplain of the Ouse and a new

bridge (already in existence in 1107) to link the settlement more effectively into the communications network. An Easter fair was granted in 1110, and the new town gradually came to be known as St Ives. The church that Abbot Ednoth founded at Slepe must have been St Ives Priory, established in 1008 and dissolved in 1539. There is no sign of a spring at St Ives Priory, but nearby is Holywell. Here there is a holy well to the south of the church; it is not clear how old the well is, but it was substantially altered in 1845 with the construction of a brick curb and arch over the top. It appears that a 13th or 14th century stone corbel is re-used on top of the well<sup>29</sup>.

## TWO MEDIEVAL TALES OF FAIRIES IN SUFFOLK

### *The Green Children of Woolpit*

William of Newburgh, a monk and historian, from Newburgh Priory in North Yorkshire, writing in the late 12th century, tells the story of the Green Children of Woolpit, which, he says, happened in the time of King Stephen (1135-1154)<sup>30</sup>.

In East Anglia there is a village, distant, as it is said, four or five miles from the noble monastery of the blessed king and martyr, Edmund; near this place are seen some very ancient cavities, called “Wolfpittes,” that is, in English, “Pits for wolves,” and which give their name to the adjacent village. During harvest, while the reapers were employed in gathering in the produce of the fields, two children, a boy and a girl, completely green in their persons, and clad in garments of a strange color, and unknown materials, emerged from these excavations. While wandering through the fields in astonishment, they were seized by the reapers, and conducted to the village, and many persons coming to see so novel a sight, they were kept some days without food. But, when they were nearly exhausted with hunger, and yet could relish no species of support which was offered to them, it happened, that some beans were brought in from the field, which they immediately seized with



avidity, and examined the stalk for the pulse, but not finding it in the hollow of the stalk, they wept bitterly. Upon this, one of the bystanders, taking the beans from the pods, offered them to the children, who seized them directly, and ate them with pleasure. By this food they were supported for many months, until they learnt the use of bread.

At length, by degrees, they changed their original color, through the natural effect of our food, and became like ourselves, and also learnt our language. It seemed fitting to certain, discreet persons that they should receive the sacrament of baptism, which was administered accordingly. The boy, who appeared to be the younger, surviving his baptism but a little time, died prematurely; his sister, however, continued in good health, and differed not in the least from the women of our own country. Afterwards, as it is reported, she was married at Lynne, and was living a few years since, at least, so they say.

Moreover, after they had acquired our language, on being asked who and whence they were, they are said to have replied, "We are inhabitants of the land of St. Martin, who is regarded with peculiar veneration in the country which gave us birth." Being further asked where that land was, and how they came thence hither, they answered, "We are ignorant of both those circumstances; we only remember this, that on a certain day, when we were feeding our father's flocks in the fields, we heard a great sound, such as we are now accustomed to hear at St. Edmund's, when the bells are chiming; and whilst listening to the sound in admiration, we became on a sudden, as it were, entranced, and found ourselves among you in the fields where you were reaping." Being questioned whether in that land they believed in Christ, or whether the sun arose, they replied that the country was Christian, and possessed churches; but said they, "The sun does not rise upon our countrymen; our land is little cheered by its beams; we are contented with that twilight, which, among you, precedes the sun-rise, or follows the sunset. Moreover, a certain luminous country is seen, not far distant

from ours, and divided from it by a very considerable river.” These, and many other matters, too numerous to particularize, they are said to have recounted to curious inquirers. Let every one say as he pleases, and reason on such matters according to his abilities; I feel no regret at having recorded an event so prodigious and miraculous.

As the author of Murray’s *Handbook for Suffolk* points out<sup>31</sup> “The bell ringing, the river, and the green colour of the children, all belong to true old ‘fairy mythology.’”

### *The Fairy Child of Dagworth*

Ralph of Coggeshall, a monk and historian from Coggeshall Abbey in Essex, writing in the late 12th century, also has a tale of fairies, set in Dagworth near Stowmarket in Suffolk<sup>32</sup>:

In the time of King Richard [1189-99], there appeared frequently, and for a long space of time, in the house of Sir Osbert de Bradewell, at Dagworth in Suffolk, a certain fantastical spirit who conversed with the family of the aforesaid knight, always imitating the voice of a one year old child. He called himself Malekin, and he said that his mother and brother dwelt in a neighbouring house, and that they often chided him because he left them and went to speak with people.

The things which he did and said were both wonderful and very funny, and he often told people’s secrets. At first the family of the knight were extremely terrified, but by degrees they became used to his words and silly actions, and conversed familiarly with him. He sometimes spoke English, in the dialect of the region, and sometimes in Latin, and he discussed the Scriptures with the chaplain of that same knight, just as he truly testified to us.

He could be heard and felt too, but not seen, except once as a very small child clothed in a white tunic, in the chamber of a certain maiden. She had asked him to show himself to her, but he would not agree to

this request until she swore by God that she would not touch or hold him. He also said that he was born at Lavenham and that his mother had left him in part of a field where she was harvesting and that he had been taken away. He said that he had been in his present position seven years, and that after another seven years he should be restored to his former state of living with people. He said that he and the others had a sort of hat that made him invisible. He often asked for food and drink, which, when placed on a certain chest, immediately disappeared.

This fairy child was apparently a human child abducted by the fairies. South Suffolk is not an area where we would expect to find fairies – perhaps these tales were inspired by the Anglo-Saxon barrows at Sutton Hoo, which lies to the southeast of Stowmarket.

## LATER TALES OF FAIRIES

### *Stowmarket (Suffolk)*

Stowmarket is not far from Woolpit and close to Dagworth, and the Revd. A.G.H. Hollingsworth, writing in 1844, recounts a number of tales involving fairies, including this one, which he dates to 1842<sup>33</sup>:

S – living for 30 years at the cottages in the hop ground on the Bury road, coming home one night 20 years since, in the meadow now a hop ground, not far from three ashen trees, in very bright moon-light saw the fairies. There might be a dozen of them, the biggest about three feet high, and small ones like dolls. Their dresses sparkled as with spangles, like the girls at shows at Stow fair, they were moving round hand in hand in a ring, no noise from them. They seemed light and shadowy, not like solid bodies. I passed on, saying, the Lord have mercy on me ... I looked after them when I got over the style, and they were there, just the same moving round and round.

### *Melton (Suffolk)*

There were also goblins in Suffolk – Robert Forby, writing in 1830, says<sup>34</sup>:

OLD-SHOCK, a mischievous goblin, in the shape of a great dog, or of a calf, haunting high ways and foot-paths in the dark. Those who are so foolhardy as to encounter him, are sure to be at least thrown down and severely bruised, and it is well if they do not get their ancles sprained or broken ; of which instances are recorded and believed.

In 1893 Lady Eveline Camilla Gurdon<sup>35</sup> linked the Shock to Melton near Woodbridge in Suffolk, not far from the Iron Age fortification at Burgh and the Anglo-Saxon barrows at Sutton Hoo. This information came from a Mr. Redstone of Woodbridge, who also wrote:

The place I know supposed to be haunted by “ Shock “ is where a man was pitched off a waggon and broke his neck, and his spirit is supposed to be periodically seen in the form of a calf or big dog with shaggy mane and tea-saucer eyes. The said creature is, I believe, only to be seen by those born during Chime hours (8, 12, 4), these people being also qualified to see any ghost.

## MERMAIDS

### *The Origin of English Mermaids*

Tales of mermaids were especially common in East Anglia, mainly in areas close to the Fens, or with links to the kingdom of East Anglia. The “mer” of mermaid is Old English mere, a pool, and it formed the first element of Old English mere-wif, the name applied in the Old English poem *Beowulf* to Grendel’s mother, a monster who lived beneath a lake<sup>36</sup>. *Beowulf*, which dates from around 800 AD, may have been written in East Anglia – interestingly, in the dialect of East Anglia, a grindle is a “drain” or “ditch.”, preserved in the names of several Suffolk watercourses, such as the Grundle of Wattisfield, a tributary of the Little Ouse<sup>37</sup>.

### *The River Gipping (Suffolk)*

Robert Forby, in his *Vocabulary of East Anglia*, says<sup>38</sup>: “the mermaid is

only remembered as a bugbear to frighten children from the water.” In Suffolk the River Gipping was said to contain mermaids. In a poem from 1837, James Bird, who was born in 1788 at Earl Stonham, not far from the River Gipping, and died in 1839 at Yoxford (Suffolk), describes his boyhood and his mother calling out to him<sup>39</sup>:

Make haste and do your errand. Go not nigh  
The river’s brink, for there the mermaids lie.  
Be home at five!

### *Fordham (Cambridgeshire)*

Mainly, however, mermaids lived in pits and pools. The Cambridgeshire poet J.R. Withers was speaking of the countryside around Fordham in Cambridgeshire, close to Mildenhall in Suffolk, when he wrote in 1864<sup>40</sup>:

And strange were the tales of the pond in the meadow,  
And eager we listened with eyes opened wide  
To Those tales often told by poor Mary the widow,  
Who lived in a cottage the meadow beside.  
Play not, my dear boys, near the pond in the meadow,  
The mermaid is waiting to pull you beneath;  
Climb not for a bird’s nest, the bough it may sliver,  
And the mermaid will drag you to darkness and death.

Fordham lies to the east of Wicken Fen, and the Fens of Cambridgeshire and Suffolk played an important part in prehistoric religious practices.

### *Fornham All Saints (Suffolk)*

At Fornham All Saints near Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk are the Mermaid Pits. John Gage, writing in 1822, says<sup>41</sup>:

There were four ancient mills in this parish, Wrenn’s mill, Babbewell mill, the Lord’s mill, and Stanwarde’s mill. The Mermaid Pits are said to derive their name from the story of a love-sick maid who perished

here:

Now there spreaden a rumour that everich night,  
The (pitts) ihaunted been by many a sprite,  
The miller avouheth and all thereabout,  
That they full oft hearen the hellish rout,

There were also thought to be mermaids at Rendlesham in Suffolk, as reported by Lady Eveline Camilla Gurdon<sup>42</sup>:

When I was quite a child, in 1814, we used to play in a field at Rendlesham where there was a pond at one end with trees round it, the grass in early spring full of flowers. It was always called the S pond, being shaped like an S, so drawn. If we went too near our nursemaid would call out to us not to go so near “ lest the mermaid should come and crome us [hook us] in.”

### *Orford (Suffolk)*

Orford is on the River Ore near the coast of Suffolk, and in the Middle Ages it was visited by a merman<sup>43</sup>:

A curious story, relating to Orford, is told by Ralph of Coggeshall (abbot of the monastery there in the early part of the 13th century). Some fishermen on this coast caught in their nets one stormy day a monster resembling a man in size and form, bald-headed, but with a long beard. It was taken to the governor of Orford Castle, and kept for some time, being fed on raw flesh and fish, which it “ pressed with its hands “ before eating. The soldiers in the Castle used to torture the unhappy monster in divers fashions “ to make him speak ; “ and on one occasion, when it was taken to the sea to disport itself therein, it broke through a triple barrier of nets and escaped. Strange to say, not long afterwards it returned of its own accord to its tortures and captivity ; but at last, “ being wearied of living alone,” it stole away to sea and was never more heard of. A tradition of this monster, known as “ the wild

man of Orford,” still exists in the village.

Between 1165 and 1173, Henry II built a castle at Orford, and in medieval times Orford was a port used for importing wine and exporting wool.

## THE DEMONIC HOUND SHUCK

There is a diabolical hound in East Anglia called Shuck, as reported by a correspondent in 1850<sup>44</sup>:

Shuck the Dog-fiend.—This phantom I have heard many persons in East Norfolk, and even Cambridgeshire, describe as having seen as a black shaggy dog, with fiery eyes, and of immense size, and who visits churchyards at midnight. One witness nearly fainted away at seeing it, and on bringing his neighbours to see the place where he saw it, he found a large spot as if gunpowder had been exploded there. A lane in the parish of Overstrand is called, after him, Shuck’s Lane. The name appears to be a corruption of “shag,” as shucky is the Norfolk dialect for “shaggy.” Is not this a vestige of the German “Dog-fiend?”

Overstrand is on the north Norfolk coast near Cromer; according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the name Shuck actually derives from the Old English word *scucca* – “devil, fiend.”

## WILL-O’-THE-WISPS

Alderfen Broad, to the northeast of Norwich, is an area of fenland peat with open water, carr woodland and reedswamp. Near Alderfen Broad is the village of Irstead, to the south of Bromholm Priory, and in 1849 the vicar of Irstead John Gunn reported on a spirit, rather like a fairy, that was seen in Alderfen by his informant Mrs. Lubbock<sup>45</sup>:

Before the Irstead Enclosure in 1810, Jack o’ Lantern was frequently seen here on a roky [misty] night, and almost always at a place called

Heard's Holde, in Alder Carr Fen [modern Alderfen] , on the Neatishead side, where a man of that name, who was guilty of some unmentionable crimes, was drowned. I have often seen it there, rising up and falling, and twistering about, and then up again. It looked exactly like a candle in a lantern.

Later, according to Mrs. Lubbock

“The Neatishead people were desirous to lay Heard's spirit, so annoyed were they by it; for it came at certain times and to certain places which he frequented when alive. Three gentlemen” (she could not tell who or what they were, she supposed they were learned) “attempted to lay the ghost, by reading verses of Scripture. But he always kept a verse ahead of them. And they could do nothing, till a boy brought a couple of pigeons, and laid them down before him. He looked at them and lost his verse ; and then they bound his spirit.”

A jack-o'-lantern of will-o'-the-wisp is an atmospheric ghost light seen by travelers at night, especially over bogs, swamps or marshes. This ghost light was known from at least the 17th century, and was described by John Milton (1608-1674) in his *Paradise Lost*<sup>46</sup>:

A wand'ring fire ...  
Which oft, they say, some Evil Spirit attends,  
Hovering and blazing with delusive Light,  
Misleads th' amaz'd Night-Wand'rer from his way  
To bogs and mires, and oft through Pond or Pool,  
There swallowed up and lost...

## ANGLO-SAXON FAIRIES AND MERMAIDS?

The fairies of east Anglia are mostly found in the south of Suffolk, the heartland of Anglo-Saxon East Anglia, and were perhaps inspired by the Anglo-Saxon barrows of Sutton Hoo. Mermaids are almost certainly



inspired by the Old English poem *Beowulf* and Grendel's Mother, a monstrous being who dwells in a lake. Will-o'-the-wisps are a reminder that East Angia is (or was) full of marshes, which played an important part in East Anglian religious life from the Late Bronze Age to the Roman period.

## CHAPTER 13

### *The Folklore of Anglo-Saxon and Viking England from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century (3) The Folklore of the East Midlands: Fairies, Headless Huntsmen, and the Phantom Horses of Lincolnshire*

#### THE ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD

##### *Hunsbury Hill (Northamptonshire)*

Horse burials are found in East Anglia (Suffolk), and have also been uncovered in Northamptonshire. At Hunsbury Hill Hardingstone, on the edge of Northampton, a cemetery which was in use until the late 7th century and was discovered in 1855, yielded a horse in a grave accompanied by a circular bronze attachment plate with a central boss and four other bosses at the points of a cruciform star with four fishes set cruciformly. At Marston St. Lawrence in the south of Northamptonshire, close to the border with Oxfordshire, a cemetery discovered in 1842-3 and dated to the last part of the 6th century included a trail of burnt grain and a horse near a human burial<sup>1</sup>.

##### *Wollaston (Northamptonshire)*

An early Anglo-Saxon Helmet, known as the Pioneer Helmet, was found in a quarry operated by Pioneer Aggregates at Wollaston near Wellingborough in Northamptonshire. A simple iron boar crest adorns the top of this helmet. The helmet accompanied the burial of a young male, possibly laid on a bed with a pattern welded sword, small knife, hanging bowl, three iron buckles and a copper alloy clothes hook<sup>2</sup>. The burial was dated to the late 7th century, and the man buried there must have belonged to Anglo-Saxon

nobility, judging from the richness of the grave goods.

### *Brixworth (Northamptonshire)*

One of the earliest churches in Northamptonshire is All Saints, Brixworth, to the north of Northampton, built between 670-720. According to English Heritage<sup>3</sup>, the church is “probably the most impressive early Saxon building in the country”. The probability is that it was the church of a Mercian monastery and that St Wilfrid was the builder. There are indications of a pre-existing (presumably Roman) building under the tower and west end of the present church. The major part of the surviving building is 7th century with re-used Roman brick.

### *Cleatham and Lovedon Hill (Lincolnshire)*

By the 5th century Anglo-Saxons were beginning to settle in parts of Lincolnshire to the north and south of Lincoln. Between 1984 and 1989 the Anglo-Saxon mixed rite cemetery at Cleatham, in the parish of Manton near Scunthorpe, in the north of Lincolnshire, was excavated in advance of its destruction by ploughing. This work resulted in the recovery of 1204 urns and 62 inhumations together with boundary ditches and other features. Cleatham originally contained an estimated 1528 burials making it the third largest Anglo-Saxon cemetery in England. It was in use throughout the early Anglo-Saxon period, starting from the mid 5th century and terminating with later 7th century “Final Phase” burials<sup>4</sup>.

There was also an extensive Anglo-Saxon cemetery, featuring both inhumations and cremations, on Lovedon Hill near Grantham in the south of Lincolnshire. Initial excavations occurred in the 1920s, but deep ploughing since 1955 has led to further extensive excavations. Between 1955 and 1963 some 500 urned cremations, 2 cremations in cists, and groups of inhumations, possibly originally interred in or beneath barrows were found. In one instance, the upper part of a column from a Romano-British building had been used to cover a double inhumation. In 1972, further excavations identified 1245 cremations and 32 inhumations. Grave

goods and other finds include glass claw beakers, a Coptic bowl, bronze hanging bowls and buckets, ornaments, and pottery<sup>5</sup>. Some of the grave goods were associated with elite burials: the so-called Coptic bowl came from the eastern Mediterranean, while the hanging bowls were manufactured in Celtic Britain.

### *St. Guthlac of Crowland (Lincolnshire)*

Lincolnshire's most famous early saint was Guthlac of Crowland, in the far south of Lincolnshire. Guthlac (673 – 714) was born into the Mercian nobility and became a soldier at the age of 15. After nine successful years, he rejected the warrior life and became a monk at the monastery of Repton in Derbyshire. After living under monastic rule for several years, he withdrew to Crowland, a secluded, desolate, spot on an “island” (actually, a gravel peninsula) in the fens of south Lincolnshire, to pursue the life of the religious hermit. About 740, scarcely twenty-five years after the saint's death, Ælfwald, King of the East Angles (713 – 749), commissioned Felix to write Guthlac's Life, which was translated into Old English in the 11th century.

In the Old English version of Guthlac's Life, Guthlac's Lincolnshire retreat is described in some detail<sup>6</sup>:

There is in Britain a fen of immense size, which begins from the river Granta [Cam] not far from the city which is named Grantchester [Cambridge]. There are immense marshes, now a black pool of water, now foul running streams, and also many islands, and reeds, and hillocks, and thickets, and with manifold windings wide and long it continues up to the north sea.

Guthlac decided he would settle there and asked the inhabitants about a suitable place to live:

Whereupon they told him many things about the vastness of the wilderness. There was a man named Tatwine who said he knew an

island especially obscure, which oftentimes many men had attempted to inhabit, but no man could do it on account of manifold horrors and fears, and the loneliness of the wide wilderness; so that no man could endure it, but every one on this account had fled from it. When the holy man Guthlac heard these words, he bid him straightway show him the place, and he did so; he embarked in a vessel, and they went both through the wild fens till they came to the spot which is called Crowland

There Guthlac made his home<sup>7</sup>:

There was on the island a great mound raised upon the earth, which some of yore men had men had dug and broken up in hopes of treasure. On the other side of the mound a place was dug, as it were a great water-cistern. Over the cistern the blessed man Guthlac built himself a house at the beginning, as soon as he settled in the hermit-station. Then he resolved he would use neither woollen nor linen garment, but that he would live all the days of his life in clothing of skins, and so he continued to do.

This “great mound” was presumably a Bronze Age barrow, in an area with numerous Bronze Age

## THE VIKINGS IN LINCOLNSHIRE

### *Lincoln and Stamford*

In the late 9th century the East Midlands was occupied by the Vikings, and both Lincoln and Stamford were part of the so-called Five Boroughs for around forty years. In the Anglo-Saxon period Lincoln was an administrative and ecclesiastical centre, but the late 9th century saw the revival of Lincoln as an urban centre which accompanied its establishment as one of the Five Boroughs. “The evidence from pottery finds shows that the development started in the south-east quarter of the lower city. By the

middle of the 10th century there had been rapid expansion including the suburb of Wigford south of the river and into the upper city by the end of the century. The Flaxengate excavations of the 1970's have provided a sequence for the development of the south east part of the city. Remains of rectangular wooden domestic buildings dating from the late 9th century, and buildings of both domestic and industrial use from the late 10th century onwards were revealed"<sup>8</sup>.

### *Viking Pendants*

The Vikings of Lincolnshire left behind some traces of their pagan beliefs. Two Viking pendants have been recovered from Lincolnshire recently which give us an insight into these beliefs. The first of these is a gold Viking pendant in the form of a "Thor's hammer", which dates from around AD 850–950 and was found near to Spilsby in 2013 (Spilsby is on the southern edge of the Lincolnshire Wolds). "Thor's hammers" are believed to be "amuletic pendants which resembled Mjölnir, the hammer of the Norse god Thor, and they have often been considered to reflect a pagan reaction to the spread of Christianity."<sup>9</sup>.

The second pendant was found in 2014 at Winteringham, on the south bank of the Humber estuary. "It is a cast silver pendant with a gilded face that depicts the Norse god Odin and his attendant ravens, Huginn and Muninn ("Thought" and "Memory"). Odin and his ravens are depicted skeletally, with Odin shown with one sighted and one blind eye, clasping the two birds to his chest whilst they appear to whisper into each of his ears."<sup>10</sup>

## THE EAST MIDLANDS FROM THE NORMAN CONQUEST TO THE REFORMATION

### *Northamptonshire*

In the later medieval period the area around Whittlebury became part of the royal forest of Whittlewood. Whittlewood first enters the surviving written

records in the early 12th century. In a writ of about 1130, Henry I instructed Richard Basset, Aubrey de Vere, Hugh de Kaynes and all his foresters of Whittlewood to allow the monks of Luffield Priory, on the Northamptonshire-Buckinghamshire border to have their easements in the forest as in times past<sup>11</sup>. Luffingham Priory at Silverstone near Whittlebury was a Benedictine priory founded in 1116 and annexed to St George's College, Windsor in 1494

The aristocrats who hunted in the forest left their mark on the landscape. A moated site lies to the south west of Lordsfields Farm at Whittlebury and is approximately 40m square. The moat island is surrounded by a substantial ditch approximately 10m wide and 1.5m deep which has small extended arm in the north western corner. Parts of the northeast and the northwest corners of the moat ditches are waterlogged. A small outer bank about 0.5m high is preserved on the west side of the moat and the central island is oval and measures approximately 20m by 17m. This moat is considered to be the site of the manor house of Whittlebury and maps of the early 18th century show a building on the island with a bridge across the ditch near the south east corner. At present access to the island is by a narrow causeway on the east arm<sup>12</sup>. Most moated sites were built between 1250 and 1350, and the majority of moated sites "served as prestigious aristocratic and seigneurial residences with the provision of a moat intended as a status symbol rather than a practical military defence."

Saints were important in medieval religious life, and Northamptonshire shared an unusual saint with Buckinghamshire. St. Rumwald was the son of King Alcfrid of Northumbria (656-664) and St. Cyneburga, and was born at King's Sutton in Northamptonshire, near the border with Oxfordshire. When he was baptised on the third day after his birth by a bishop called Widerin and a priest called Edwold, he made his own profession of faith in a clear voice, and then died, having first preached a sermon on the Holy Trinity for the benefit of his parents, and given directions for his burial. He was first buried at King's Sutton, where a cult developed. His relics were

then translated, first to nearby Brackley, two months after his death, and then, two years later, to Buckingham<sup>13</sup>. John Leland, writing between 1538 and 1543, says that St. Rumwald was still remembered at Brackley<sup>14</sup>: “There be two faire springs or wells a little west-north-west from St Peter’s Church. The one of them is callyd St Rumdale’s [Rumwald’s] well, wher they say that with in a few days of his birth he prechid.” St Rumwald’s well at Brackley no longer exists, though there is an 18th century St Rumwald’s well at King’s Sutton.

Rockingham Castle near Corby was founded by William the Conqueror as a motte and bailey in 1066, rebuilt during the reign of Edward I as a residence and fortified in 1323. The castle started to fall into disrepair in 1485 and was subsequently rebuilt in the 16th century<sup>15</sup>. Rockingham Park was originally a deer park, documented in 1256, enlarged in 1485 and 1638<sup>16</sup>. Rockingham lay at the centre of Rockingham Forest, which extended as far south as the River Nene, which flows through Northampton. Pipewell is a hamlet or liberty within the old bounds of Rockingham Forest, lying in the three parishes of Rushton St. Peter’s, Great Oakley, and Wilbarston, just outside Corby. Here in the year 1143 William Batevileyn founded an abbey for Cistercian monks, dedicated like all houses of that order to the honour of the Blessed Virgin. The abbey was dissolved in 1538<sup>17</sup>.

### *Lincolnshire and Peterborough*

St. Helen was the mother of the Roman emperor Constantine (306-337) , and it was claimed she had visited the Holy Land and found relics of the True Cross; she was born in Asia Minor (now Turkey), but by the 12th century it was believed that she had originally been British (her son Constantine was acclaimed emperor in York, where he was leading a campaign against the Picts). St. Helen’s well at Brigg on the River Ancholme near Scunthorpe in the north of Lincolnshire was first mentioned in 1697 in the diary of the English antiquary Abraham de la Pryme. He notes: “having passed through Brigg on our way towards Melton, we went



by a great spring, famous in days of old, called St Helen's Well." Being a substantial spring, it would be identified in the 1850s as being a suitable source for a public water supply for the growing town of Brigg. Therefore in 1852, a Robert Cary and Cary Charles Elwes built a pumping house. This is what remains of St Helen's well today: a plain rectangular building without windows built of yellow gault brick with a Welsh slate roof and York stone gable copings. The structure sits upon a large earthen mound.<sup>18</sup>

In 2012 a Late Bronze Age bronze sword was found in or near the spring. This is part of a group whose deposition is interpreted as follows: the sword was "killed" by breaking its hilt. Then a belt with a metal ring at either end was laid down in an active spring. The sword, possibly in a scabbard, was laid down flat over the belt and between the metal rings, its weight helping to keep the belt in place. Sandy soil accumulated over both rings, and around the sword, showing that the spring remained active or intermittently active after the deposit. The ploughing which brought sand and flints into the topsoil eventually reached, and clipped, bent, and lifted, the tip of the sword blade, and was probably the first disturbance it had suffered since its deposition<sup>19</sup>.

Louth is in east Lincolnshire at the foot of the Lincolnshire Wolds. Louth Abbey was a Cistercian Abbey founded, from Fountains Abbey, in 1137 by Alexander, Bishop of Lincoln, first at Haversholm, near Sleaford, but moved to Louth in 1139. Water was brought to the site by an aqueduct, known as the monks' dyke, some two miles long. The only parts above ground are bits of two bays of the east end of the church, built of chalk rubble with facing (very little left) of sandstone or chalk. The rest of the site has never been built over or ploughed and considerable remains must exist below ground<sup>20</sup>.

Freiston is in well-drained fenland 2 miles east of Boston in Lincolnshire. Freiston Priory of St. James was founded as a cell of the Benedictine Abbey of Crowland soon after 1114, and continued until the dissolution of the mother house in 1539. At Spittal Hill, Freiston, which adjoins the Boston-

Wainfleet road, traces of ancient foundations are to be seen in an enclosure. It is “not improbable” that the infirmary of St. James’s Priory, Freiston was situated here<sup>21</sup>.

Perborough Abbey was founded in 655 and destroyed by the Danes in 870. It lay ruined until it was refounded around 963-6 as a Benedictine monastery. It was attacked and sacked by Hereward the Wake in 1070, during his revolt against William the Conqueror, and in 1116 was set afire, the fire raging for 9 days. Rebuilding began shortly afterwards, again as a Benedictine monastery. It was dissolved in 1539 and reopened in 1541 as the cathedral of Peterborough<sup>22</sup>.

## A MEDIEVAL TALE OF THE WILD HUNT AT PETERBOROUGH

In 1127 King Henry I (1100-1135) gave the abbacy of Peterborough to a certain Henry of Poitou, a relative of the king, who was also abbot of Saint-Jean-d’Angély in south-western France. The monks of Peterborough strongly objected to this<sup>23</sup>:

all the archbishops and bishops said that this grant was against right, and that he could not have in hand two abbacies. But the same Henry made the king believe that he had given up his abbey on account of the great disquietude of the land, and that he had done so by the order and with the leave of the pope of Rome, and of the abbat of Cluny, and because he was legate for collecting the Rome-scot. Nevertheless it was not so, but he wished to keep both abbeys in his own hands, and he did hold them as long as it was the will of God. In his clerical state he was bishop of Soissons, afterwards he was a monk at Cluny, then prior of the same monastery, and next he was prior of Seigny; after this, being related to the king of England and to the earl of Poitou, the earl gave him the abbey of St. Jean d’Angeli. Afterwards, by his great craft, he obtained the archbishopric of Besançon, and kept possession of it three day; and then lost he it right worthily, in that he had gotten it with all

injustice. He then obtained the bishopric of Saintes, which was five miles from his own abbey, and he kept this for nearly a week, but here again the abbat of Clugny displaced him, as he had before removed him from Besançon. Now he bethought himself, that if he could be sheltered in England, he might have all his will, on which he besought the king, and said to him that he was an old man, and completely broken, and that he could not endure the wrongs and oppressions of that land, and he asked the king himself, and through all his friends, by name for the abbacy of Peterborough. And the king granted it to him, forasmuch as he was his kinsman, and in that he had been one of the first to swear oaths, and to bear witness, when the son of the earl of Normandy and the daughter of the earl of Anjou were divorced on the plea of kindred. Thus vexatiously was the abbacy of Peterborough given away at London, between Christmas and Candlemas; and so Henry went with the king to Winchester, and thence he came to Peterborough, and there he lived even as a drone in a hive; as the drone eateth and draggeth forward to himself all that is brought near, even so did he; and thus he sent over sea all that he could take from religious or from secular, both within and without; he did there no good, nor did he leave any there.

Henry of Poitou's arrival in Peterborough was greeted with an ominous supernatural event:

Let no man think lightly of the marvel that we are about to relate as a truth, for it was full well known over all the country. It is this; that as soon as he came there, it was on the Sunday, when men sing "Exurge quare O Domine;" several persons saw and heard many hunters hunting.—These hunters were black, and large, and loathly, and their hounds were all black, with wide eyes, and ugly, and they rode on black horses and on black bucks. This was seen in the very deer-park of the town of Peterborough, and in all the woods from the same town to Stamford; and the monks heard the blasts of the horns which they blew

in the night. Men of truth kept in the night their watch on them, and said that there might well be about twenty or thirty horn-blowers. This was seen and heard from the time that the abbat came thither, all that Lent, until Easter. Such was his entrance, of his exit we can say nothing yet: God knoweth it.

This supernatural event was the Wild Hunt, which was supposed to occur in advance of a catastrophic event. As Jennifer Westwood and Jacqueline Simpson say<sup>24</sup>: “Similar packs of spectral hounds are known all over England. They go under various names: in Devon, the Yeth (Heath) or Wisht Hounds; in Cornwall, Dando and his Dogs. The ‘wide-eyed’ Peterborough hounds also sound very much like the Norfolk Shuck.”

## THE FAIRIES AND HEADLESS HUNTSMEN OF NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

### *The Headless Huntsman of Whittlebury Forest*

According to Thomas Sternberg, writing in 1851<sup>25</sup>

The forest of Whittlebury has been well stocked with deer since the days of the first king of England, and the midnight revels of goblin huntsmen may, in all probability, be traced to the deer-stealers, who, to avoid detection, would manifestly encourage a superstition furnishing such an admirable cloak for their depredations. The acephalous horseman is also well known in Northamptonshire; and though our dialect is not rich enough to afford him a particular designation, we may boast possession of this veritable Dulhallan. He is confined to no particular district, but common to almost every parish in the county. On a calm summer's night, when the pale glimmer of the young moon scarcely penetrates the dark foliage of the trees, he may be seen mounted on his silent-hoofed steed, slowly riding along the green-sward border of some old green lane or lonely road, and woe to the benighted traveller who crosses his path. His appearance is generally

regarded as ominous of evil, often death. In this class must also be placed the mischievous goblin who prowls about the county in the guise of a shaggy foal ; sometimes deluding people into mounting him, and then vanishing with a shout of fiendish laughter. “ It’s a common tradition in villages,” says John Clare, “ that the devil often appears in the form of a shagg’d foal; and a man in our parish firmly believes that he saw him in that character one morning early in harvest.”The form of the foal, it will be recollected, was one of Puck’s favourite incarnations : —

Sometimes I meet them like a man,  
Sometimes an ox, sometimes a hound,  
And to a horse I turn me can,  
To trip and trot them round;  
But if to ride  
My hack they stride,  
More swift than wind, away I go.  
O’er hedge and lands.  
Thro’ pools and ponds,  
I whirry [hurry], laughing ho, ho, ho ! “

The Dulhallan that Sternberg refers to is a headless (acephalous) rider in Irish folklore.

### *Puck at Aynho*

Sternberg also links Puck to a spring at Aynho in the far south of Northamptonshire<sup>26</sup>:

Traces also yet linger of a darker and more ancient superstition connected with wells and fountains — that which represents their immediate vicinity as the favourite resort of the elves, and their dark waters the abode of the well-sprite. In the village of Aynho is a spring called Puckwell which, we think, may be allowably referred to —

that shrewd and knavish sprite  
Called Robin Goodfellow.’

The well at Aynho is first mentioned in 1712 by the county historian John Morton. Discussing medicinal springs tested by him and found to be scarcely “inferiour” to more famous ones, he observed, “Such is the Mineral Water at Aynho, by the name of Puck-well<sup>27</sup>. Aynho is not far from Whittlebury and Whittlewood Forest, and not far from Brackley where St. Rumwald was venerated.

### *The Water-Fairies of Brington*

Brington is 7 miles northwest of Northampton, the home of Hunsbury hillfort, and there were fairies at Brington which had a liking for water. Thomas Sternberg, writing in 1851, says<sup>28</sup>:

In some parts of the county there are ponds which, from this circumstance, receive the name of “fairy pools.” Near the village of Brington is one so designated, where, I have been assured, a few years ago they might be seen rollicking on the surface, and gamboling among the water-plants which lined the edges. Wells are also favourite places of their resort ; and there appears to be a vague species of apprehension in the rustic mind at even passing a lonely well after night-fall.

Sternberg reports that Brington even had a “fairy ring”<sup>29</sup>

which has attained such great local celebrity as to be called, par excellence^ “the fairies’ ring.” It is believed to have existed from the earliest times, and to have resisted all the efforts of the plough to efface it, which, notwithstanding the awful calamities constantly attending such sacrilegious attempts, have, it is said, often been made. Village traditions relate that by running round it nine times on the first night of the full-moon sounds of mirth and revelry may be heard proceeding from the subterranean abode.

### *The Goblin Huntsman of Rockingham*

Rockingham near Corby, not far from the Roman temple at Brigstock, was in Rockingham Forest and home to Rockingham Castle. Thomas Sternberg, writing in 1851, mentions a goblin huntsman similar to the one at Whittlebury<sup>30</sup>:

The goblin huntsman and his train, the “wütend heer” of the German peasantry, are known to the good people of this county by the name of the “ wild-men,” “ wild-hounds,” &c. The Devonshire traditions represent the “yeth-hounds” as the disembodied souls of unbaptized infants ; but the Northamptonshire superstition is extremely vague and ill-defined. Both Whittlebury and Rockingham contend for the honour of his residence ; and the wild whoop with which he cheers his hounds is still said to be heard among the glades of both forests

### *The Redman of Rockingham*

He also speaks of a Northamptonshire fairy called the Redman, “an elf of solitary habits, residing in caves, old wells, etc.”. Sternberg tells a tale of the Redman from Rockingham<sup>31</sup>:

Two brothers are reduced by the badness of the times to seek shelter in a hut built in the midst of a forest, where they subsist upon the juicy haunches of the king’s deer. It appears that the same scarcity which drove the hunters to the woods affected also, in a similar way, the fairy denizens of the neighbouring wastes. One day, whilst the eldest brother remains behind to cook the meat, there enters a little Redman, with the modest request, “ Plaze gie me a few broth.” [“Please give me a little broth”] Up. the ladder rushes the hunter to find the hatchet, intending to inflict summary vengeance upon the intruder; but in the mean time the little Redman seizes the pot from the fire, and makes off. The exasperated cook pursues, but soon loses the cunning fiend among the intricacies of the forest. After a similar adventure, befalling the other brother on the following day, it becomes the turn of the much-despised youngest to prepare the meal for the absent brethren. Profiting by the

mishaps of his comrades and well knowing that a caught Redman proved a treasure to his captor, he lies in wait for his visitor behind the door ; and no sooner has the unsuspecting spirit entered, and given utterance to his usual phrase, “Plaze gie me a few broth,” than he finds himself a prisoner. After many fruitless endeavours to escape, he conducts his captor to his residence— an old well, in a retired part of the forest ; and there ransoms himself with such store of gold, that his vanquisher, to quote my narrator, ‘’ is made a mon on for life.”

## THE SHAG-FOALS OF LINCOLNSHIRE

### *Tathwell*

In the Roman period people in Lincolnshire venerated a rider god, particularly around the Trent, in The Lincolnshire Wolds, and in the Sleaford area – which may explain the supernatural horses of Lincolnshire folklore. Orgarth Hill is in Tathwell, a few miles south of Louth, and was haunted by a man riding on a shag or shaggy horse, which suddenly appeared without any warning, and kept up with persons until they were terrified, but usually it appeared to people riding or driving, who did not notice the horse and its rider, until they looked to see what had terrified their horses, which stood trembling with fear until they bolted down the hill<sup>32</sup>. There is a Neolithic long barrow and a barrow cemetery at Tathwell, perhaps similar to the barrows further south at Skendleby.

### *Freiston*

Freiston is 2 miles east of Boston, and in the Middle Ages it was home to a Benedictine priory, founded in 1114 and dissolved in 1539. There is a curious superstition relative to a place in the parish of Freiston called Spittal Hill (from a hospital which was formerly there), that a hobgoblin or sprite frequents the spot at midnight in the shape of a small rough horse. This sprite has been named the “Spittal Hill tut” and sometimes the “shag-foal.” It is said to have frequently followed a traveller, mounted his horse behind



him, and almost hugged him to death with its forelegs. It accompanies him to a certain distance and then vanishes. Different causes are assigned for this appearance by those who believe in it. One is, that a murder was committed near the spot where the ‘ shag-foal ‘ appears. Another, that a treasure is secreted there, and that this hobgoblin is appointed to watch over and protect it<sup>33</sup>.

### *Kirton-in-Lindsey and Roxby*

Kirton-in-Lindsey is in north Lincolnshire. A manifestation supposed to be a shagged-foal was seen near Kirton-in-Lindsey in a donkey-like form some fifty or fifty-five years ago [i.e. about 1842-7]; and Goosey Lane, or Boggart Lane, near Roxby in north Lincolnshire has also a spectre of the same species, or had as late as the third decade of the 19th century.

The “supernatural steeds” which once haunted the Trent near its junction with the Humber “may perhaps have sprung from a mythological strain only distantly allied to Puck and Tatter-foal. Less than a hundred years ago, the dusky forms of these creatures were still supposed to be discernible by moonlight, walking on the surface of the water.”<sup>34</sup>

## A SAINT AND HER PHANTOM COACH AT PETERBOROUGH

Castor is about 4 miles west of Peterborough, and in Roman times it was the site of a *praetorium*, a monumental Roman building which stood on high ground on the northern edge of the Nene valley, on a site since occupied by the parish church of Castor. It had commanding views to the south across the Roman industrial suburbs of Normangate Field and onwards to the Roman town of Durobrivae in the distance. It was located close to two major Roman roads – Ermine Street and King Street. It was built around 250 AD and was on a grand scale. The structure was raised up on two great terraces. The building(s) covered an area of 950 feet by 426 feet and had at least 11 rooms with tessellated floors and mosaics, two bath-houses and several hypocausts. The term *praetorium* was used by Edmund

Artis in the 19th century. This suggests some public administrative function but the building could also be seen as a luxury residence or palace<sup>35</sup>.

The church at Castor is dedicated to St. Cyneburh, a 7th century Anglo-Saxon saint who died at a nunnery in Castor but was later translated to Peterborough. Her saint's day is apparently still celebrated at Castor, each year on 6 March, the anniversary of her translation to Peterborough. She is also commemorated in the Roman track known as Lady Conyburrow's Way, which once led from Castor Field to Durobrivae, as reported in 1712 by the Reverend John Morton. Morton also recorded a legend "which relates that a pathway miraculously appeared when Kyneburgha, while on a mission of mercy, was pursued by three villains intent on compromising her. A chasm opened up behind her and engulfed her assailants, whilst a carpet of flowers sprang from the contents of her spilled basket. Thus, her honour was preserved."<sup>36</sup>.

Cyneburh was also associated with a phantom coach. William Stukeley records in 1737<sup>37</sup>:

They have still a memorial at Castor of S. Kyniburga, whom the vulgar call Lady Ketilborough, and of her coming in a coach and six, and riding over the field along the Roman road, some few nights before Michaelmas. This is the remains of her festival celebrated here, on the day of her obit, 15 Sept., till the abbot of Peterborough took away her body and carryed it into the Cathedral together with S. Tibba, 600 years agoe

### *The Fairies and Supernatural Huntsmen of the East Midlands*

A number of supernatural beings in the East Midlands seem to be associated with horses and/or hunting, which may be associated with prehistory or with the Anglo-Saxons. A rider god was venerated in the region during the Roman period, and horses played an important part in Anglo-Saxon burial rites, in Northamptonshire, but also in East Anglia, especially Suffolk. So it is possible that the veneration of horses in the

Roman period was reinforced by pagan Anglo-Saxon burial practices, so that this focus on horses and riders over several centuries imprinted itself on later folklore.

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